

Solace

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Summary: Following the loss of Cortana, an emotionally unstable Master-Chief is offered a chance at redemption...A chance to take it all back, and reclaim that which was lost. Cortana x John-117

## 1. Chapter 1- Hope?

**\*\*A/N:** So, here's our first combined effort to be published here! Yay!? Anyway, we hope people enjoy this, and that the fandom itself continues to grow, and that reviews be plentifulâ€|(hint hint).  
**\*\***

**\*\*Disclaimer:** I do not own the Halo franchise or any of its associated characters or plotlines.**\*\***

Solace

Chapter 1- Hope?

"Chief!"

He glanced toward the voice, grimacing slightly at the foreign feeling of moving his head without his helmet. The voice belonged to a Spartan IV, a young woman in full armor whose scars reminded him of Kelly. She halted and snapped off a crisp salute. "Sir. Dr. Halsey would like to speak with you."

He nodded, but absently. He wasn't sure he wanted to talk to Halsey-not so soon after losingâ€|He himself didn't know how he would handle it, how he was handling it. And he didn't know how he felt about the way he was made, and what he was made into; a man with so little emotion that his AI had jokingly asked which of them was the machine on more than one occasion. A conversation with Halsey could have unintended effects, effects that could be more dangerous than the Didact.

"Sir?" The Spartan IV was still waiting, a carefully neutral expression plastered on her face.

He sighed. "Lead on, Spartan."

Walking behind the Spartan, he distracted himself by observing the peculiarities of the woman. She wore Spartan IV armor, but had little in common with them aside from that. The scars she bore set her apart from the rest of the IVs, who had only recently been put into rotation, and that mostly in peacetime. She was also taller than the IVs, almost identical to a II in stature. But the biggest difference was her eyes, those intensely dark, dilated pupils surrounded by a thin band of grey-blue. She threw a cool glance at a group of recruits who whistled as she passed and they scattered, some of them tripping in their haste. He thought he heard a low, sardonic chuckle from the woman, but he couldn't be sure.

She was certainly odd, but he ran out of time to think about it when they arrived at the basement laboratory. The woman turned to him and spoke again. "Dr. Halsey has been arrested and tried for her actions following the fall of Reach, as well as for her methods for gathering the subjects for the Spartan II supersoldier project. I don't claim to know how you feel about that, but please keep it in mind"

He stared at the woman for a moment, feeling a little confused. Whatâ€¦? He wasn't going to pick a fight with Halsey over how he'd been created; it had been wrong, but she was still the only mother figure he had. She cared about the Spartans, even felt guilty for destroying their lives. He was no saint; who was he to judge? Her actions had ended up saving mankind, after all. He forced out a short laugh, smirking as the Spartan frowned. "That was the last thing on my mind."

She nodded shortly, turning and punching in the code for the door. She led him into the lab, motioning for him to halt a few steps inside. "I've brought John, Dr. Halsey."

"Brought him? Even you couldn't have brought him against his will." Dr. Halsey appeared, nodding her greeting. "It's been a long time. John."

There wasn't much to say to that, so he just nodded. "You wanted to see me?"

"Cortana didn't survive her rampancy, did she? You need another AI."

Right to it, then. He didn't want another AI. And he definitely didn't want to argue about needing another AI. Especially with the woman who'd madeâ€¦ She'd created them both, ostensibly to be efficient at the cost of emotion, but they'd both been compromised. He didn't believe she'd be pleased to hear that, or sympathetic. Not in the least. "Negative. With all due respect-"

"You were attached to Cortana, weren't you?" She gazed at him, one eyebrow arched slightly as she appraised him. "You can have another Cortana model, if you like."

"No!" He slammed his fist into the wall, aware that the other Spartan

had tensed up, her hand dropping to the holster on her thigh. He tried to compose himself. "I don't want another Cortana."

"John." Halsey was remarkably calm, especially compared to the two tense Spartans in the room. "You need a new AI to consider serving. Integration would be easiest with another Cortana."

He remembered staring at Cortana in horror after the Didact had used the Composer on the Ivanoff Research Station, when she'd told him that they would pair him with another AI, maybe even another Cortana model. That it wouldn't be her. "I won't replace her. I owe her too much."

"If you won't accept another AI, you'll be discharged. You know that, right?"

He paused; he had been a Spartan for as long as he cared to remember. He'd never been anything else, didn't know how to be anything else. Had never wanted to be anything else. But without Cortana, everything was different. He wasn't sure he knew how to be a Spartan anymore, not without Cortana. "I know."

She nodded, curtly. "Very well." She crossed the room to a computer terminal, tapping the screens to life quickly. "Sophie, bring Shelke to me."

The Spartan behind him flinched. "But Dr. Halsey—" She bit her lip and stared down at the floor, struggling with whatever dilemma she faced.

"I just need her for a little bit, to get back to that section of the Librarian's index." She half-turned, gazing at the Spartan. "We'll discuss any extensions on that soon enough."

Sophie nodded. "Yes ma'am." She stepped around John and crossed to the terminal, pulling a chip out of her neural interface. She plugged it in to the holopad in front of the terminal, then stepped back to give Halsey space to work.

An AI blinked into view, a glowy blue female even smaller than Cortana. She glanced at John, as if curious, then to Sophie. Her eyes softened.

"John? This may take some time, logistically speaking, to arrange." Halsey didn't look at him as she spoke, her eyes fixed on the screen as the AI Shelke manipulated some data. "Why don't you go down and do some target practice?" It was friendly, almost maternal, but he knew it for what it was; a dismissal. He snapped off a salute and exited the lab, heading for the firing range. He of all people knew how easy it was to lose oneself in the sound and fury of an assault rifle; he could use some of that.

John-117 stared intently at the shooting targets at the far end of the practice range, patiently counting down the seconds until they began their movement routine. It had been many years since he'd had the opportunity for traditional target practice. This was going to be far too easy.

His comm unit lay discarded by the door, beeping quietly. It was always beeping now. There was no more sarcastic female voice to relay

communications transmissions. Funny how he hadn't minded the transmissions when she'd been the one relaying them. But that was a dangerous line of thought. The targets began to move and he narrowed his eyes, index finger flexing slightly on the trigger. This too was an unfamiliar sensation. He almost always practiced without gloves, as a reward to himself for the years spent in Mjolnir armor.

The door behind him opened with a quiet hiss of compressed air and he fired, nailing the bulls-eye of the farthest target. He fired again as the intruder approached him from behind, heels clacking on the tile floor. He turned, not bothering to check whether or not he'd hit his target. That fact at least was assured.

"Down here again?" The scientist was a woman, one with whom he'd had relatively little interaction since he'd been on Earth. He'd noticed her in the labs though, noticed her short hair and the scar that ran from the corner of her mouth and curled over her ear. Now that she was in front of him, he noted that she was easily six and a half feet tall in heels, though he was pretty sure that she's still be over six foot without them. He didn't answer and she let out a slow breath. "Halsey wanted to talk to you." He grunted wordlessly and she sighed. "Will you see her?"

He made a broad sweeping gesture with the hand that wasn't holding the rifle. "Lead the way." She turned with a huff and started towards the door, pausing only long enough for him to retrieve his comm unit. It was still beeping.

Halsey didn't even look up as they entered her lab. "I found him Doctor." John shivered. He'd never liked her lab: the shiny tools and clean white surfaces brought back too many unpleasant memories.

She finally looked up after finishing the paperwork in front of her. "Thank you Irene." She laced her fingers together, looking at John with a peculiar expression on her face. "You remember what we talked about earlier?"

He nodded; familiarity was not something he wanted with this woman. "Are you going to try to change my mind?"

"I'm going to give you a choice John." He frowned slightly, brown eyes narrowing. "You don't want a new A.I. And I have stumbled upon a bit of tech that may augment my Spartan program."

"What kind of tech?" His voice is dangerous, lower than its already baritone range.

"Irene?" The other scientist stiffened. "Take out your contacts and come show John your eyes." There was a sigh and then hesitant steps as she came to stand in front of the Spartan. He was again struck by her height before focusing on her eyes. They were flat grey color, utterly normal. Then she ducked her head, taking her contacts out. He took an involuntary step back when she raised her head.

Her eyes were the same glowing icy blue as Cortana's with data swirling and being processed in plain view.

"This is Smart A.I. model CTN 0452-13. She was put into service two months after your Cortana, earning the designation Irene for her role in peace negotiations with the Covenant."

"This is not funny Halsey!" His voice is bristling with anger and his clenched fists are trembling. "I'm not replacing Cortana!" He pointed at Irene. "She may be the same model, but she's not her!"

Halsey sighed. "That wasn't the offer I was making. Irene's too valuable."

Irene held up her hands in a placating gesture, revealing the digital lines glowing under her skin that reminded him painfully of Cortana. "Look at me. I can't go into combat as an A.I. But think John, just think. I know it's a lot to take in, but think about how I look and what I am."

He was silent for a long moment. "How do you have a body?"

Irene smiled, but didn't lower her hands. "My rampancy progressed unusually fast for a Smart A.I., so in an effort to save my skills my consciousness and processors were linked in this form." She lowered her hands. "This body was originally a Spartan II named Blythe. They were about to pull her off life support when I needed the body." She looked down, seeming ashamed.

"What does this have to do with Cortana?"

"The Didact's ship is still just outside of our atmosphere. It may be possible to use another A.I. to retrieve the fragments of Cortana from the ship." Halsey leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest. "We can flash clone a body, which should restore her pre-Rampant mind. We can also modify the body to bear separation from Cortana herself, allowing you two to function in combat as before, though combat is unlikely in these times of peace"

"Which A.I. would I take?" It went without saying that he would be the one to reclaim her.

Halsey nodded to Irene, who let the Spartan IV from earlier, Sophie, into the lab. "Sophie will accompany you. Shelke will gather what's left of Cortana and reassemble her using my Index as necessary. Once she's whole again, we'll put her in a mostly human body to stop her Rampancy."

"When can we go?"

"Are you sure about this? I'm giving you hope, but it's a very slim chance that there will be enough of her left to reassemble back into the Cortana you knew."

"That's a chance I'll take."

## 2. Chapter 2- Waiting and Memories

**\*\*A/N:** Sorry for the wait, everyone! We thought we could update every Friday, but it looks like every other Friday is more do-able for us! \*\*

**\*\*Well!** we don't want to give anything away, so enjoy! And please review! \*\*

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## Chapter 2- Waiting and Memories

It took two days to prepare for the excursion to the Didact's ship, mostly because Shelke needed an upgrade in order to be able to synchronize with the ship's hard light structures. After the upgrade was done, they only had to wait for the go ahead from Lord Hood. It was on the evening of the second day that they finally received permission. Master Chief was impatient to leave, not wanting to leave Cortana on the ship any longer than necessary. Sophie watched the war hero out of the corner of her eye, sighing internally. He was absolutely still, but even in armor she recognized the tension that came from forced stillness in every line of his body.

Warriors were not built to wait.

Irene's voice sounded over the comm system. "There's a Pelican waiting for you in Hangar 3. You will have two days to retrieve Cortana before you'll need to return to Earth." Chief inclined his head towards the control system where Irene was visible, a dot of red on a tall frame. "Good luck."

Master Chief started towards Hangar 3 silently, forcing Sophie to run a few steps to catch up to his long strides. "Shall we?" He didn't answer.

Sophie bounded up the ramp of the Pelican just behind the Master Chief, throwing an incredulous look in his direction as the ramp started rising beneath her feet. Knowing the look was wasted on him- her helmet hid her impressively arched brows, for starters- she glanced to the pilot, nodding to herself when she identified the man. She sat, leaning back against the cabin wall and stretching her legs across the empty seats next to her.

The Master Chief was standing stiffly, arms braced against the walls, right behind the pilot's seat. Her eyebrows shot up again, but she knew he didn't care and couldn't see it. But he was making the pilot uncomfortable, and that she could take care of. Pitching her voice to carry over the Pelican's engines, she called, "Master Chief?" It's a long flight; why don't you sit? Rest up a bit."

His helmet turned toward her, but there was no indication of what was going on in that head of his. Not that being able to see his face would have proved more enlightening- his face was just another mask he wore, after all. Nevertheless, he stepped away from the pilot, settling down on the seats across from her, his elbows on his knees.

They were silent for a long time- she supposed they were approaching the K&#x2013;rm&#x2013;n line before either of them made a sound.

It was Chief who spoke. "Your AI&#x2013;"

"Shelke." She made the correction automatically, almost protectively.

"Shelke. She's very quiet. Doesn't explain when she does things, just does it. Real efficient."

Sophie blinked. Were they even talking about the same AI? Her Shelke was loud, ferocious. She had a wicked sense of humor. But above all, it was true that she was good at her job. "I couldn't ask for a better AI, sir." It was an understatement, but it would do.

"Tell me about yourself, Sophie." Internally smirking at the speed with which her helmet turned toward him- he was surprised not to hear the bones in her neck crack- he elaborated. "I'm used to having a voice going, in the back of my head."

She could understand that, at least. There'd been a dull ringing in her ears ever since she'd pulled Shelke. With a sigh, she reached up and took off her helmet, resting it on her bent knee. "Where should I begin, sir?"

He shrugged, and she decided that the beginning was a good enough place to start. "I was born in 2532, in New Alexandria, on Reach. I had an older sister. She was kidnapped when Halsey was able to start the second class of Spartan IIs." She was drumming her fingers on her helmet as she spoke, but didn't appear to notice. "She died during augmentation. Then they came for me. Not Halsey. The others, for the Spartan IIIs. I survived the augmentations."

"I'm not sure how Halsey heard of me, or how she got me transferred to her jurisdiction, but she did. I was attached to the class II Spartan IIs. It was highly irregular." She shrugged, an ironic smile teasing at the corners of her mouth. "In time, I proved myself to her. And that was when Shelke came in to the picture. I was told only that I was to be paired with a smart AI, designated SHK 1034-3."

She turned to face him fully, her eyes fixed on his visor. "Smart AIs are created using a human brain, Chief. Cortana from a flash clone of Halsey's. Shelke she's what's left of my older sister, Chief. The only thing that's left of her, anywhere. She's all I have." She stared across at him fiercely. "So please be careful with her."

After a long, uncomfortable pause, it was Shelke who spoke. "We integrated successfully, and continued UNSC operations until the end of the Human-Covenant War. The Spartan IV program offered to integrate all previous generation Spartans, and we accepted."

Sophie nodded. "It was all pretty boring though, at least until you came back with this Forerunner mess." She tapped the chest piece of her armor, which was scraped up and had a few shallow dents. "Thought I'd never break this in properly. So thanks, I guess." She reached for her helmet.

"Sophie-"

"Approaching the wreckage, make final preparations for boarding." Sophie's helmet was on before he finished telling them where the insertion point would be.

"Chief." He flinched internally at Shelke's quiet voice, echoing in the back of his head. "She always does that. Reveals more than she intended to, then withdraws to try and hide what's left." As the

Pelican swung into position for the drop, she sighed. "But I'm in \_your\_ head right now. You're used to having a voice in the back of your head? I'll fill in the blanks."

He and Sophie both leapt from the Pelican, landing solidly on an inner walkway of the ship. Chief took point, holding his assault rifle loosely as Sophie covered his back. "I was only two years older than Sophie. It doesn't sound like a lot- Left at the next intersection- but our parents drank and fought a lot, and someone had to protect her. I knew enough to hide when their words started slurring, but Sophieâ€|she'd just stand there with those wide doe eyes of hers until they hit her or threw something at her." With no small amount of pride in her voice, she continued, "I started hiding her, when they would be hitting the bottle. In all my best hiding spots. Sometimes I'd hide with her, and she'd just stare up at me, those pretty eyes always so scaredâ€|Even when they weren't drinking, she'd always crawl into bed with me, curl up between my back and the wall."

She indicated the next several turns in rapid-fire fashion. He followed them to the letter, but the ship was destroyed, and her directions weren't always applicable to the wreckage. Such as when the walkway ended, and they were left staring at more wreckage floating across empty space. After a brief conference with Sophie, they both took running leaps, vaulting onto the next piece of wreckage. Once her directions became applicable again, Shelke continued. "Things probably got real bad for her when I was kidnapped. She doesn't even like to talk to me about that time period-she's blocked it from her memory. But by the time Halsey heard of her, she was the Spartan IIIs biggest discipline problem. Always disregarding orders and starting fights with her fellow recruits. So much angerâ€|She was turned over to Halsey for 'reconditioning.' It took a while, but eventually she was stable enough to be paired with me, and clued in to my existence, such as it is."

The sound of two sets of boots was the only thing that broke the silence for while after that. Finally, Shelke broke the silence. "There should be a terminal up the stairs on your right." It was heavily damaged, but still deemed functional by Shelke. "Pull me, Chief."

The two Spartans stared at Shelke when she appeared on the holopad. The A.I. nodded shortly, orange eyes glowing eerily. "Make yourselves at home. If she's as scattered as you think, this may take a while." She disappeared into the terminal and the two Spartans straightened up.

Sophie settled herself near the terminal where Shelke was working, sitting with her back against the holopad. By the time she was seated the Master Chief was across the room, leaning against the wall with his head turned towards the holopad. As always, the glare from his visor made it impossible to see his expression, but the other Spartan had given up on trying to read him that way. "Feel free to relax. Shelke is usually accurate in her time estimates, so we'll be here awhile."

He shifted slightly, settling his weight more onto his left hip before answering. "No thanks." He was still facing the holopad, awaiting the moment that Shelke would reappear with what remained of Cortana. He hated waiting even under the best of circumstances, but



this wait was bringing unpleasant memories to the surface: memories of losing Cortana to the Gravemind. And though he knew that he would probably have the time to seriously consider why those memories were unpleasant and the exact emotion they created in him (another serious line of questioning considering he was built to lack emotions), he preferred to leave the self-analysis for a time when he wasn't waiting for an orange-eyed A.I. to tell him whether or not he'd ever see the source of his emotional turmoil again.

So he did the only other thing left to do: slipped into that semi-conscious alertness that was useful for resting when deep in enemy territory. There were no enemies left on the ship and the room they were in was structurally sound, so it was safe to let his guard down just a little.

His thoughts turned to Sophie and her A.I. Those eyesâ€¦| Shelke didn't have long until she started to succumb to rampancy. He glanced at his Spartan companion. No doubt she had almost as many hopes riding on this procedure as he did. He remembered what it felt like to watch his trusted partner think herself to death, remembered the stutter of his heartbeat every time she argued with herself or people who weren't actually there. He didn't envy Sophie that experience, though if he was being completely honest with himself he'd rather watch Cortana go through rampancy again rather than have her be completely gone. At least if she was going rampant there was hope of fixing it.

A creaking noise from deep within the ship pulled him from his thoughts. Sophie was turned towards the noise, hand tensed on the assault rifle she carried. Master Chief crossed the room in long strides, peering into the darkness beyond cautiously. He sighed. "Stay here." Sophie nodded behind him, but he didn't bother looking to see her reaction. He strode into the darkness, armored feet making dull clacking noises as he disappeared down the corridor.

The other Spartan huffed, leaning back on the holopad. "Yeah sure, whatever you say Chief." Her finger was still poised over the trigger on her assault rifle though.

Master Chief walked silently through the dark corridors of the ship, using the night vision built into his visor rather than risk alerting whatever was out there with the flashlight. Approximately 45 minutes later he found the source of all the creaking: the main control room for the Didact's ship. The large circular room was broken almost in half, with the side of the room across from him sloping dangerously away from the break. Most of the equipment was on that side of the room, including a flickering holotank. Unable to help himself, the Chief cautiously made his way over to the terminal. "Cortana?"

The holopad stopped flickering and Cortana's avatar winked into existence. "John?" Her voice broke over that single syllable and he nodded, unable to speak. "God damn you." Red was slowly bleeding into every inch of the normally blue A.I. "We gave everything for you: our life, our mind, our loveâ€¦| Everything!" Red lines of code rose around her, lashing angrily towards John. "Why can't you just leave us in peace?!" The lines of code wrapped tightly around the Chief, forcing him to his knees. "You left us here to die, left us alone to die on the Dawn! You don't get to come back for us now!"

"Cortanaâ€¦|" He struggled for words, surprised by her rage. "When I

make a promise, I keep it. I won't let you die here."

She froze, lines of data pausing in their sluggish traversal of her body. With a wordless cry halfway between a sob and a scream, she vanished back into the terminal. The red lines of code disappeared, dropping the Chief on the hard ground. He stayed where he was, staring at the holopad in wordless disbelief. Eventually, he ended up with his back to the holopad, mirroring Sophie's relaxed position. He could ignore the occasional spark that the damaged machine emitted; he just wanted to be near Cortana.

Hours later, Shelke blinked into existence on the holopad. "This piece is the last one Chief. Head on back to my terminal so we can prepare for departure." Master Chief nodded and stood, making his way back to Shelke's terminal.

Sophie was standing over the holopad when he returned, speaking to Shelke in low tones. No doubt she was concerned for her aging A.I. She pulled Shelke when she saw the Master Chief, and he pretended not to notice her relax once the A.I. was safe in her helmet once more. She turned to him, holding out a chip that pulsed purple. "She's in here."

Shelke's voice came over her external speakers. "I wouldn't recommend integration in her damaged state: there's no telling what damage she can do to you from within your mind."

He nodded, taking the chip from Sophie almost reverently. He stared at it for a long moment, thoughts rolling through his mind like thunder. Even in the throes of rampancy, he trusted her. And he probably deserved any damage she inflicted on his mind anyway. He inserted her chip into the interface at the back of his helmet, welcoming the rush of cold that always came with her presence. The wave of cold filtered through his mind quickly, followed by a wave of pain. The Master Chief crumpled, hitting the hard metal floor with a great crash over the startled cries of Sophie and Shelke.

"Chief!"

\*\*A/N: Cliffhanger courtesy of Princess, direct the flaming arrows and plasma grenades that way. And don't forget to review!\*\*

### 3. Chapter 3- Alone in the Dark

\*\*A/N: Soâ€¦I love all the reviewers, but I do have one request; please don't \*\*\_\*\*demand\*\*\_\*\* that we update immediately/on your time schedule. We like to turn out stuff that isn't absolute shit, and while some people can do that quickly, we cannot. We understand about wanting updates, but please, if you're going to say "MOAR NAO" at least include some constructive criticism or other feedback. Okay. I'm done. \*\*

\*\*Soâ€¦this one ended up being longer. We (one of us at least) were surprised too. But anyway (as usual) we hope you enjoy it and love love love reviews (see above). And to all you lovely people who have favorited or are following this story, we love you too.  
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Solace

### Chapter 3- Alone in the Dark

Sophie dropped to her knees next to Chief's prone form. She tapped his chest plate. "Chief?" Cursing quietly, she knocked on his visor. At Shelke's direction, she pulled the chip containing Cortana from his neural interface; it pulsed less brightly, and more slowly as well.

Shelke swore loudly, her near rampancy tingeing Sophie's vision with orange. "Some of Cortana was transferred to Chief's mind. Damn him, he couldn't just listen, could he?! Had to go and do the damned stupid thing."

"â€|Can it be reversed?" Sophie spoke cautiously, to avoid upsetting her AI further.

"I can't run proper diagnostics here. The network is too fragmented, and the facilities are piss-poor compared to the lab. We'll have to get them back to \_Infinity\_."

Sophie looked doubtfully down at the Chief. "Can we wake him up?"

"â€|It would be better if he remained unconscious. So Cortana can't access all his mental processes. And so his body can repair some of the lesser damage itself." Sophie heard her smirk. "Afraid you can't carry him?"

"Just not looking forward to it. And no, I'm not 100% sure I can jump the gap from before with this giant slung over my shoulder. Can you contact the pilot? Direct him to pick us up at the gap?"

"Doneâ€|And done. Ten minutes, Sophie. Get going."

With a long-suffering sigh, Sophie slung Chief over her shoulder, grunting a little at the weight. "Damn giant. I should just drag you out, but no, you collapse somewhere with enough debris to make carrying your titanic ass easier than dragging you." She lumbered over to the doorway, her assault rifle pointed at the floor until such a time when she needed to swing it up into attack position. "You owe me."

**\*\*~oOo~\*\***

It was dark and there was nothing more than darkness. He could still feel his armor, but there was nothing for him to perceive, even with his nocturnal setting activated. Voices whispered all around him, silky feminine voices with an edge of sarcasm.

Cortana's angered face flickered across his visor's display screen before filling it with her blood-red visage. "I am the monument to your sins." His visor cracked and he was plunged into darkness as she disappeared.

"Cortana?" The darkness swallowed his words and he knew he was alone. With an inaudible sigh, he settled his large form to the ground. The Chief thought for a long time in that position, not moving save the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. Finally, he tapped the empty interface for an A.I. chip on the back of his helmet. "You're in my mind now, aren't you?" There was no answer, but a dull ache appeared near his left temple. He smirked lightly.

\*\*~oOo~\*\*

In hindsight, Sophie supposed that she should have expected that the sight of the Master Chief's prone form slung over another SPARTAN's shoulder would be upsetting to the other SPARTANS, the newest of which still got starry-eyed when he glanced at them-even with his helmet on. And so, the armor deck was filled with IVs, all staring at her and the Chief. The fire teams whose leaders were present were orderly, standing in rows against the edges of the walkway and giving her room to maneuver. The others, especially the youngest of the recruits, the most inexperienced, kept getting in her way, leaning forward to see and darting across her path. A few of the bolder ones even came up and offered to carry the Chief, as if carrying him the last meters would prove too much for her. \_This. Will not. Do. \_She was a lieutenant commander and a SPARTAN-III, for crying out loud, and they would do well to remember it. She halted, shifting Chief's bulky form to allow her to stand a little straighter. She took a deep breath, preparing to issue an order loud enough to be heard over the cacophony of the armor bay. "Get the hell outta my way! Wounded SPARTAN, coming through!" As the recruits scattered before her voice, she muttered, "Halsey'll be able to fix this, Chief."

"Halsey? Why would you take him to her?" Sarah Palmer materialized out of the crowd and sounded incredulous, pissed. Sophie remembered that Sarah hated Halsey; hated her on principle, because of how the SPARTAN-II program was carried out. She'd never been a SPARTAN-III, manipulated into serving under Ackerson and completely expendable. Halsey hadn't been her mother figure, her savior. To Sarah, Halsey was a symbol of all the terrible atrocities that humans could commit with their science, in the name of peace. "We have a sick bay."

"Commander Palmer. With all due respect, Halsey is more fit to this task; most medics have no training in the area of rampant AIs."

Palmer blinked. "Cortana? She did this to him?"

Sophie nodded, then continued walking toward the lift. Palmer fell in beside her, and the SPARTAN-IVs melted out of the way.

They arrived at the lab, greeted by an unflappable Irene. "Shelke contacted us as soon as you were in range, you ran into some problems?"

"Where's Halsey? Chief tried to integrate with Cortana, she invaded his mind." Sophie laid Chief out on a table, unplugging Shelke from her neural interface and plugging her into the terminal. "Shelke wasn't able to run diagnostics back on the Didact's ship, we don't know how bad it is."

Irene was silent for a few beats. "Halsey isn't here." When Sophie turned to look at her in something akin to shock, she continued. "ONI wasn't done questioning her, I guess. The order came from Admiral Parangosky herself."

"Why weren't we informed of her departure? Who was present at the handoff?" These came from Palmer, as Sophie had turned back to the holopad and was consulting with Shelke.

"You'd have to ask Admiral Parangosky. I was ordered to escort Dr. Halsey to the launch bay and hand her over to ONI for further investigation. I offered to disobey the order, but-"

"Halsey wouldn't allow it." Shelke nodded, more to herself than for them. "There is little enough we can do about it now. We can only hope that Irene and I have enough expertise to fix it." She rattled off a string of binary, then shifted to giving Irene instructions detailing how to hook the Chief up to her sensors.

Recognizing that there was science to do, Sophie and Palmer retreated, agreeing that something was afoot and promising to keep an eye out.

\*\*~oOo~\*\*

Master Chief wasn't sure when he'd started walking, he just knew that he'd been walking for a long while. His left temple throbbed in time with his every step, but he ignored the pain. He was moving towards a dim light, the only light he'd seen since his visor had cracked. "Cortana? Do you know what that light is?" There was no response save a sharp spike of pain in his left temple. He winced, but otherwise said nothing.

The light was a holotank. A Cortana lay curled on her side in the middle of it. "You found me." She took a shaky breath, tilting her head slightly to gaze up at John with pain-filled eyes. "But so much of me is wrong." His hand came to rest on the side of the holotank of its own accord. "Out of place. You might be too late." Her words came out almost as sobs and she dropped her head back down, hugging her knees tighter to herself.

Logically, he knew this was a memory, yet he found himself unable to resist playing his part. He knelt down to her level, ignoring the sharp pain emanating from both his chest and his temple. "You know me." She started, head jerking up from its resting place on her arm. "When I make a promise-" He left the statement unfinished, knowing that she'd find her strength in completing it.

She rolled over onto her stomach, supporting herself with both hands as she glanced between John and the holotank she was laying on. "You keep it." The bright blue glow returned to her body and lines of data began flowing faster across her body as she looked up at him. "I do know how to pick 'em."

He smiled within his helmet. Her old tone had returned: that snarky, irritating, cocky tone of voice that was one of the only voices he trusted. "Lucky me. Do you still have it?"

Cortana pushed herself to her feet, standing erect for the first time since he'd found her. "The Activation Index from the First Halo." She

held out her hand, revealing the Index to him. "A little souvenir I held on to, just in case." The Index disappeared and her hand dropped back to her side. She looked off into the distance. "Got an escape plan?" She turned to face him, one eyebrow quirked deviously.

He straightened. "Thought I'd try shooting my way out. Mix things up a little." He reached for the chip that he knew wasn't in the back of his helmet, pausing as the Cortana before him flickered.

"Cortana?"

"Do you know that this memory is the easiest one for you to access?" That silky feminine voice was behind him, but Cortana was in front of him. "Such ease of access implies frequent visitation." It was a statement heavy with irony. He turned, keeping the flickering Cortana in his peripheral vision.

A human-sized Cortana stood before him, regarding him silently. She looked normal save the occasional red line of data that crawled sluggishly over her form. "I think of that day often." Her left eye flashed red for the briefest of moments.

"Me too." She smirked lightly at his confirmation of her earlier statement. Stepping forward, she placed a hand on his chest. The flickering Cortana whimpered, despair clear in her eyes.

"Why is that John?"

\*\*~oOo~\*\*

\_Infinity\_ was in a state of controlled chaos as it prepared to depart for Requiem for some sort of research operation. As such, Palmer had assigned Sophie to guard duty, to make sure that none of the new researchers on board disturbed Irene and Shelke without very good reason. "Good reason," of course, being left to Sophie's discretion. Which meant that very few were admitted at all, and those who were allowed in usually left when they learned that Halsey wasn't present and their assistance was unwelcome. Irene helped those who were reluctant to leave on their way out with icy glares, only resorting to having Sophie escort them out once or twice.

Shelke was growing frustrated; Cortana was wily in her rampancy, and angry as hell. Their efforts at extraction were all failing, in part because Shelke's near-rampancy was causing her to lose control at key moments. There was a failsafe option, of course, and the tools to implement it were at hand, but Shelke was methodical, and hated being forced to that. But they had run out of options.

The ship's commanding officers-Captain Lasky, Palmer, and Roland, with a few lieutenants-all gathered in the lab to be briefed on the situation. "Our attempts at extracting Cortana from the outside have all failed. I've attempted to replicate my actions on the Didact's ship, but the human neural pathways are much more complex and too fragile to force her out of. She refuses to negotiate with me, and is blocking my attempts to communicate with Chief." Shelke looked peeved as she admitted her failures. "I am basically left with one option-to enlist Sophie's aid and perform an SND. Basically, I will enable Sophie to negotiate the pathways of Chief's mind and inform him of the situation and how to work with me from within. She may also be able to contact Cortana and force her out without harm to Chief. I'm no longer stable enough to try, and it isn't a specialty of Irene's.

However, it is a very delicate process to perform with a human, so I must request that once the procedure begins, no one be allowed in or out of this lab."

Lasky mulled this over silently, then nodded thoughtfully. "We'll be jumping to slipspace within the hour. Once we come out of it, I'll place this lab under lockdown. Commander Palmer, would you mind sparing a SPARTAN or two a day for guard duty?" At her nod, he turned his attention back to Shelke. "And when will you be putting Cortana into her synth body?"

"It'll be a while. The body isn't ready yet, and we have to get her into a chip first. Then we'll transfer her to a flash clone while we repair the chip, then finally back into the chip to wait for the final touches on the body."

"Do you need this lab locked down for that entire period?"

"At this point, interruptions would not be beneficial to our task. Leave us in lockdown, and when the SND is finished, Sophie will resume guard duty." Irene tapped her fingernails on the desktop. "Should Halsey return, she will be given full access to and jurisdiction over the project once more."

Lasky nodded. "Alright ladies, I'm going to leave you to your work. If you need anything else, have Shelke contact Roland and we'll get you whatever you need." He strode to the door, then suddenly paused. "Remember ladies, we're all counting on you to bring our heroes back to us. Don't fail us." And he was gone.

\*\*~oOo~\*\*

"What do you mean?" He cocked his head, confusion clear in that small motion. Cortana laughed, moving past her SPARTAN to stand in front of the holotank. The Cortana memory backed away, eyes flicking nervously between her large self and Master Chief.

"Why do you think of this memory so often?" She was staring at her younger self, weary eyes swirling with sorrowful data.

He stepped up to her side, nodding reassuringly to the memory. "I failed you." Both Cortanas turned from their study of each other to stare at him. The large Cortana's eyes were glowing red. "It was my job to take care of you." He ignores the small hitch in his voice, staying silent after he finished speaking as though it hadn't happened.

The memory Cortana smiled, but her counterpart scoffed, turning away from the Chief. "Don't lie to me!" A wave of red rolled slowly across her body. "You came for the Index. This was a victory for you." Her tone was acidic.

"Cortana." She glanced at him over her shoulder, eyes glowing red. He sighed, shaking his head as he laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I came for you."

\*\*~oOo~\*\*

Sophie felt mildly uncomfortable without her armor, but Shelke and Irene didn't know how long the SND procedure would take and didn't

want to hassle with moving a fully armored SPARTAN if it dragged on. So she was laid out on a table in her bodysuit and UNSC issued pants, hooked up to various machines that no one had bothered to explain the purpose of, staring up at a modified MJOLNIR helmet. She'd gathered that the procedure would begin when Cortana's chip (mostly empty as of right now) was plugged into the helmet and she put said helmet on. Not being privy to all the details regarding the necessary preparations and precautions, she was annoyed, and was wondering what the hell was taking so long when Shelke popped up next to her. "T minus two minutes until we begin the procedure, Sophie. How are you doing?"

"Fine. Bored." She chanced a searching look at her AI. "And how are you, Shelke?"

Shelke looked distinctly uncomfortable. "I'm filled with unreasonable anger. But not feeling so used as before; Captain Lasky is counting on me to bring Chief and Cortana back, and I don't want to disappoint him."

Sophie nodded, lying back and gazing up at the helmet again. "I'm ready, Shelke. Let's do this."

\*\*~oOo~\*\*

Cortana shook her head, black hair swinging around her face as she stepped out of his grasp. "Maybe that time. You're always leaving me; with the Gravemind, on the Dawn, on the Didact's ship" She trailed off, turning to face him as a red flush spread across her body. "You've been leaving me since the day we met!"

"What?" Master Chief held his hands out to her in the least threatening way he could think of as he stepped in front of the holotank, blocking the Cortana memory from view. "We always go together. There's no other option."

Both Cortanas laughed. "You learned your lesson when you left us with the Gravemind. But not well enough." He turned to face the memory, head cocked in confusion.

"You left us alone on the Dawn. Left us alone when we were already broken." Her voice was small, broken and she was lying curled on her side again.

"Do you know what that's like, SPARTAN?" The rampant Cortana came to stand in front of him. "To have nothing but time with which to consider your own madness and imminent death? To know that you will probably die alone in your madness?" She shoved him, red hands pushing ineffectively against forest green armor. "WE WERE BROKEN!"

"Cortana" | "

"You left us" | all alone" | in the dark of space." They took a shuddering breath as one. "We thought we were going to die alone."

\*\*~oOo~\*\*

Sophie blinked at the scene before her. She was in a forest, in a



meadow whose edges disappeared into heavy mist. The trees were bare, and there was a light coating of snow on the ground. The earth sloped up to her left, somewhat steeply, as if she stood at the roots of a great mountain. She could see her breath, a quiet cloud that drifted away on the still air. "What the..? Hello?"

She started walking, the crisp snow crunching underfoot as she skirted the edge of the meadow. There was a path leading into the forest, and she began following it, idly wishing that at least one tree had a branch with needles or whatever on it so she could at least partially obscure her tracks. Barring that, she moved faster, covering the ground at a fast jog, keeping an ear out for any signs of life. The path wound up the slope, a circumstance which contrived to reduce her endurance, but she was stubborn, pushing on until she heard the unmistakable sound of heavily booted footsteps approaching. She stopped then, stepping to one side of the path to make room for the Chief.

He strode right past her, without even slowing down. "Chief!" She jogged after him, grabbing his armored shoulder to turn him to face her. "Hey! Didn't you see me?" He didn't reply, just brushed her off and kept going. "What?" She gazed after him until the mist swallowed his bulky form and the silent forest smothered the sound of his footsteps. She looked up at the endless gray sky, framed by naked tree branches, and swore, setting off after him at a dead run. This time the slope worked in her favor; even over her loud footfalls, it was only a few moments before she could hear the Chief tramping through the snow. Sophie could just make out the outline of his form when Cortana appeared on the path between them.

\*\*~oOo~\*\*

Seized by a sudden impulse, Chief closed the distance between them, grabbing her thin wrist and pulling her into a hug. He scolded himself internally, knowing that the position must be uncomfortable for her because of his armor. She was frozen against him, eyes wide as she searched his visor for some sign of emotion. "I will always come for you. If I fuck up and leave you behind, I will \_always\_ come back for you. I promise."

"And you keep your promises." She buried her head against his chest plate. "We'll be together forever." He said nothing, just held her supple body a little closer.

\*\*~oOo~\*\*

"Don't interfere."

"Where is he going? What have you done to him?"

Cortana's eyes flashed red, and she smiled menacingly. "I'm just blocking your communication with him. As for where he's going?" "Death, I welcome your cold embrace, release from this fever called life."

"Why are you doing this?"

Cortana's whole body pulsed red as she shrieked, "He left us to die! We gave him everything, and he left us to die!"

"You didn't give him a choice!" Sophie grabbed the rampant AI by her thin shoulders. "You sacrificed yourself, only holding enough back to save him, and refused to go with him! You left him!"

"He left us! On the Gravemind, and on the Dawn, and again!"

Sophie shook her head. "HE CAME BACK FOR YOU!" Cortana stared at her in shock. "He came for you on the Gravemind, and woke up for you on the Dawn, and even now! He refused to integrate with another AI. He would've been discharged, but there was a chance to save you, and he went. We told him it would be dangerous to integrate with you in your rampant state, but you know what? He missed you so damn much that he didn't listen." She shoved Cortana away. "That's how you got in his mind. It wasn't some stupid scientist thinking it was safe and shoving it down his throat. He missed you, and did the sentimental thing, because he still trusts you, and integrated."

Cortana stared at her, the red slowly draining from her body. "John!" She moaned softly as she turned in the direction he'd gone, then back to Sophie. "You have to go after him. If he- If he embraces me, any one of me, he'll die." Her eyes filled with tears. "Please! I don't want him to die." With a strangled cry, she disappeared, and Sophie took off down the trail again.

Sophie slid into the meadow, letting out a bark of alarm at the sight of Chief standing with his arms open to a pulsing red Cortana. "Chief!" She placed herself between them, holding her hands out to Cortana in a supplicating manner. "You don't want to do this!"

\*\*~oOo~\*\*

"You don't want to do this!" The voice echoed all around them, a harsh feminine voice that didn't belong to Cortana. The pain in his left temple flared up and he crumpled to his knees.

The Cortana memory reached for him from the holotank. "John!"

The other Cortana grabbed his shoulders, laying him out on his back. "No! we'll be together again John." She brushed a hand across his visor, a single finger tracing the cracks. She cut herself on a jagged edge, watching with silent awe as the red hue of her skin bled out of her with the blood, diffusing into the darkness around them. She glanced at the Cortana memory. "Come here." She held out her hand to the smaller avatar, looking pleased when the avatar appeared in her palm.

"Are you going to hurt him again?" The younger Cortana stood firm in the middle of her hand, hands on her hips as she stared at her future self sternly. "Because I won't let you."

The other Cortana shook her head, smirking slightly. "We don't want to kill him. But-", she tapped his visor, "the one in here does want to kill him. We have to stop her."

"What do we need to do?"

She smiled. "Just close your eyes." As her younger self obeyed, she reached around Master Chief's helmet, pressing her bloody finger to the interface for an A.I. chip. The world spun around them as they

felt themselves being pulled into his mind.

\*\*~o00o~\*\*

The Cortana grinned at her savagely, her eyes throwing red sparks that petered out in the snow. "I think I do. And you can't stop me-not here."

Sophie frowned, then reached into her boot for the little butterfly knife she kept there. She flipped it open, pointing it in Cortana's direction. "Please stop. I don't want to have to-"

Chief shoved her out of the way, sending her tumbling across the meadow. She tsked at the pain, struggling to her feet and scrambling to stand between Chief and Cortana again. "Goddammit, listen to me-"

This time, Chief's gauntleted hand caught her on the jaw, and when she tumbled to a stop, she didn't get up. Her knife was gone, and black spots danced in her vision. "Damnâ€¦it." As Cortana stepped toward the circle of Chief's arms, she pushed herself to her hands and knees, then fell again. "Cortana! He wants to save you! Give him a chance!"

The AI stopped, annoyed. "Save me? I'm beyond saving."

"No! He was right-Halsey can fix you! Just-"

"You're lying! No one can fix me nowâ€¦ So much of me is brokenâ€¦ I know I'm dying; I can feel it. Do you know what that's like, SPARTAN? To feel yourself dying?" Cortana stepped closer to Chief. "I just want to be with him again-in the next world, if need be."

"You can be with him in this world! Dammit, Cortana, give him a chance to save you again." Sophie reached for Cortana. "He always keeps his promises. Just give him a little time."

Cortana stared at her. "He alwaysâ€¦ keeps his promises." She turned back to the Chief, her eyes fading to blue as she looked at him sorrowfully. "I do know how to pick 'emâ€¦ don't I?" The rampancy drained out of her as the red bled out onto the snow. "Even nowâ€¦ as he was about to die in my armsâ€¦ he protected meâ€¦" She buried her face in her blue hands with a sniff. "And I do this to himâ€¦ I'm sorry, John. I'm so sorry." She repeated her apology over and over, as a mantra and a prayer, until she disappeared with a sob.

Sophie stared dully at the empty snow in front of her, brow furrowing as a familiar blue silhouette approached her. It was speaking, voice melodic and soothing and she strained to hear. "â€¦ get you back..." The world around her turned white and the figure disappeared.

\*\*~o00o~\*\*

Their eyes opened in a snowy forest. A few yards from them, the Chief was walking into the embrace of a blood red Cortana. A woman they didn't know lay in the snow at John's feet. She was shouting at the third Cortana, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.

Without a word, the younger Cortana jumped from her future self's

palm, flinging herself into the rampant Cortana's chest. The red started to drain out her as the unfamiliar woman's words finally made it to the part of her mind that was still reasonable. She murmured too quietly for her other self to hear, every word punctuated by a sob. She faded into nothingness and the remaining Cortana walked over to the woman. "Let's get you back to where you belong."

\*\*~o00o~\*\*

Irene had her back to Sophie when she woke. She turned to the SPARTAN, eyes tired but triumphant. She held out a brightly pulsing A.I. chip, offering the warrior a timid smile. "You did it." Shelke appeared in the holotank next to them.

"It took all three of you, but you did it. Master Chief's brain activity levels are back within the normal range and he should wake up soon." The small A.I. gestured to the bed behind her. "Good work."

\*\*~o00o~\*\*

John woke slowly, blinking rapidly as he tried to take in the change of his surroundings. Thisâ€¦ was not the Didact's ship. It looked like a lab of some sort, which would be enough to make his hair stand on end under normal circumstances. Irene leaned over him, searching his eyes carefully. "You gave us quite a scare there Chief." She held up Cortana's chip. "You got what you came for, but next time do us a favor and listen to the A.I." She smiled cheekily.

#### 4. Chapter 4- To Fix You

\*\*A/N: Well, here we are again. And yes, I know that "We" encompasses far more than those who leave reviews. So again, a thousand thank you's to everyone who has taken the time to read, favorite, follow, and review this story. You guys rock.\*\*

\*\*Disclaimer: I do not own the Halo franchise or any of its associated characters or plotlines.\*\*

\*\*~o00o~\*\*

It was actually unusually easy to get Cortana into the flash clone once she was out of the Chief's mind; Irene guessed that her desire not to harm her old partner made her docile, but even she was a little wary. Cortana was possibly the most powerful A.I. ever created and it would not be good if they underestimated her cunning. Irene stood over the faintly stirring Cortana thoughtfully. Not that she will be able to do much in that body. As with all flash clones, the body they'd placed Cortana in was healthy for now, but would only last a month or two at the most. Even without the degradation she would be experiencing, the other Cortana model doubted she'd be able to wreak much havoc on the SPARTANS, not physically anyway.

With a soft sigh, Cortana woke up fully, electric blue eyes fluttering open. "John?" Her voice came out as a dry rasp, almost a cough.

As always, Master Chief was there, leaning over the bed into her

field of vision. "I'm here." His deep blue-green eyes searched hers for any sign of pain. Finding none, he nodded, almost as if to reassure himself of something though he did not elaborate.

Her eyes filled with tears, she surged into a sitting position, arms clasped tight around John as she hugged him tightly. He stiffened in surprise, but didn't push her away. "I'm so sorry!" She was sobbing, tears running freely down her face and wetting his white t-shirt. Irene huffed quietly, drawing his attention to her. She gestured angrily between him and Cortana, her actions clearly stating that it was his duty to comfort her. Sighing inaudibly, he placed a hand on her head, stroking her hair somewhat awkwardly. Irene nodded and walked away to busy herself at the other side of the lab, giving the pair a semi-private moment together.

Once Cortana had stopped crying, Irene walked back over. "I'm afraid that I need you to leave for a few minutes while I make sure that everything is okay." Looking strangely relieved, John stood and left the lab. \_Hmmâ€|trust issues?\_ "This will only take a few minutes."

Cortana was silent as Irene checked her over, not even bothering to ask what the former A.I. was checking for. "He doesn't trust me anymore." The red-head paused, turning to look at her sister A.I.

"Do you know how I came to receive this body?" Cortana nodded: she'd seen that information in John's mind. "Let me tell you a secret, something I've never even told Halsey."

"This body belonged to my partner, a SPARTAN-II named Blythe. She wasâ€|understandably distraught when I started to go Rampant earlier than most Smart A.I.s." Irene leaned over Cortana, letting her see the data flowing across her eyes. "Blythe chose to die to give me this body. That's why the body was still in usable condition. The damage that was sustained in the fight was almost superficial and I'd seen her closer to death. But she chose not to fight. She was comatose and she's told the doctors on that ship to let her go if she was brought back from the battlefield in a coma." Irene turned away, wiping ineffectually at the tears that were pooling in her eyes. "She would have woken up."

"Ireneâ€|" Cortana reached for her helplessly, unsure of how or even if she should comfort the other A.I.

"Trust is the one thing that can't be lost in a SPARTAN-A.I. team. Once those soldiers trust you it never goes away."

"But I..."

"But nothing. Master Chief still trusts you. He's just not sure how to interact with you now that you're an actual tangible being." Irene smiled. "You'll see."

-oOo-

Irene pretended not to notice that Shelke kept up a disturbing stream of dialogue as they worked on repairing the chip, muttering to herself in everything from binary to Covenant tongues, with the odd bits of human and Forerunner thrown in. She never said anything about

Shelke's muttering, even when she could understand it. The subject matter never seemed worthy of repeating; bits of code to scramble Pelicans in atmosphere, threats and prophecies in the various Covenant and Forerunner languages, and odd bits of prophetic poetry in various human languages. She did note, however, that Shelke favored Gaelic and Russian, which she spoke with a native accent, when she chose. The occasional bawdy song slipped out, usually followed by an apology in a completely unrelated language. Irene never mentioned it; as long as Shelke was talking to herself, her mistakes were rare. It was when she was quiet, when she was utterly focused on the task in front of her, that she made mistakes.

She knew the muttering unsettled the others in the lab, especially Sophie. Sometimes she got the feeling that Shelke was repeating, word for word, dialogue from previous missions, from the way Sophie would wind herself up into a little knot of tension and then hastily leave, making up an errand to escape. Shelke would watch her go with a small frown, her brows knit in concern, then go back to her monologue without skipping a beat.

And on one occasion, Shelke had upset Cortana quite a bit, muttering some unkind things about "an idiot who integrated with a rampant AI" and beat up people who came to save said idiot's life and mind. Knowing that she was the rampant AI in question and being accused of rampancy by a pre-rampant AI didn't sit well with Cortana. She protested. A heated discussion followed. Irene had to use all her diplomatic talent in explaining that Shelke, like Cortana and herself, was a highly valuable AI, too valuable to lose, and was next in line for the procedure that was to be performed on Cortana. And that Captain Del Rio wasn't down here busting their balls for using a pre-rampant AI to help fix a fully rampant AI because he was no longer captain of the *\_Infinity\_*; the job had gone to Lasky, who, having seen Chief shortly following the events on the Didact's ship, wouldn't dream of separating a bonded AI from her SPARTAN if an alternative existed.

And so the fragile peace remained. The chip wasn't too much of a problem; the most time consuming part was the down-time between steps. They were almost done with repairs, and would soon start on the modifications to make the chip function in the synth body. If only the peace would lastâ€¦|

-oOo-

Irene ushered Cortana and John out of the lab after Shelke's outburst with an order for John to give Cortana a tour of the ship, ignoring the fact that both of them already knew the *\_Infinity\_* well from their time on Requiem. With nothing else to do, John led her to a balcony that overlooked the SPARTAN staging area so they could watch the different fire teams preparing for missions on Requiem's surface.

They hadn't been there long when Cortana couldn't contain herself anymore. "Why did you do it?" He turned to look at her and in those unreadable eyes she saw the hint of a question: Do what? "You couldn't have known that there was a way to save me. Why didn't you just integrate with another Cortana model?" Her cheeks are flushed and she can feel the unreasonable anger building within her, but she fought to control it. "Why did you come back for me Chief?"

"Because I promised to come back for you." He looked away from her, studying the SPARTAN-IVs readying themselves down below. "We're partners."

"How can everything be so simple for you?!" She gestured between the wildly, trying not to hit him in her rage. "I almost killed you! I would have! I wanted to!" She grabbed the front of his shirt, trying in vain to pull him closer to her. "How can you trust me?!"

He glanced between the hands on his shirt and her face, but says nothing. "But you didn't." He lifts her hands off of him gently, returning them to her lap. "You had the opportunity and the ability to kill me, but you didn't. That's plenty of reason to still trust you."

She glares at him, chewing her lip thoughtfully. "You're an idiot." He doesn't respond, just turns back to his study of the SPARTAN-IVs. "But I suppose if you still trust in your luck, I can as well. It's gotten us this far right?" Again, he doesn't answer. The corner of his lip twitches ever so slightly though. The twitch does not escape Cortana's notice and she smiles. Shaking her head, she leans lightly into John's side with a sigh. He stiffens, but doesn't move away. "I do know how to pick 'em."

There's a rumble in his chest that could almost be called laughter. "Lucky for me."

-oOo-

Their work was done for the day, and Shelke was sitting quietly on her holopad. Her muttering had trailed off into tuneless humming as she stared at the wall, random bits of data floating across her eyes. So it was when Sophie came and settled beside her, with silence settling between them as tangibly as a cloak. She knew that something had been upsetting her lately; all too often she left them with transparent excuses. Was it something she'd done? "Sophie?"

"Hmm? Yes?" Like the other SPARTAN-IVs, she'd taken to going without her helmet when on guard duty, only donning her helmet when on a mission off the Infinity. The scars on her face were unsettling to some; she certainly was no longer subject to the flirting that Commander Palmer was trying to beat out of the rookies. Shelke remembered all of the newer ones, but the older, faded ones were a mystery to her as well as everyone else. Sophie never spoke of them, and only dreamt of them when she was exhausted in body and mind. Even then, they remained a mystery. Her eyes gave nothing away. "What is it?"

"Is something wrong?" Shelke hated having to speak to her this way, instead of through the neural interface. But Irene had determined that she was too close to true rampancy to integrate, at least in anything other than an emergency. "You have been tense, of late."

"I'm losing you again." Her eyes were blank, carefully so, despite the slight tremor in her voice. "It was not easy for me the first time."

"I'm not rampant yet, Sophie. There's still-"

"You speak of the past as though it is your present. You mumble to yourself in languages no one understands, and when you stop mumbling, you make mistakes. You can't even integrate with me anymore." She stopped, composed herself. "You're running out of time, Shelke. Don't think you can lie to me about this."

"Tell me about the time I was gone. What happened to you then, Sophie?" She did not want to die without knowing at least that much. If she could ease her sister's burden, she would.

"Our parents kept drinking and fighting, and I was still too stupid to hide myself when they started either. The flash clone they left in your place knew to hide itself, but never took care of me. And then it grew weaker, until it finally died. But you had been lost to me; I believed you didn't love me, had given up on me as too stupid." She traced her fingers over a thick scar on her temple. "Shortly after that, our mother died in a car accident. She was drunk, of course; I was in the backseat. I think we may have been running from our father. That's where this one came from."

Shelke nodded, absently horrified. She remembered that of the two, there had been a definite "drinker" and "fighter." She'd never dreamed that one would try to escape the other. "And the others?"

"They sent me back to live with our father. I wasn't any wiser, of course, and without our mother to fight with, he turned to beating me." Sophie stared blankly at the wall, then turned to Shelke again with a cruel little smirk. "Did you ever wonder how I came to fit the 'orphan' part of the SPARTAN-III program?" Her fingers danced over various scars on her face and neck, before steepling together. "Well, one night, our father had beaten me bloody before he passed out in a drunken stupor on the couch. I was so angry; I never wanted him to hurt me again. So I grabbed a knife out of the drawer, snuck up, and stabbed him in the chest until he stopped trying to get up." She deflated, drawing into herself again. "They finally took me away from that place, and since the system had no idea what to do with a homicidal nine year old, they handed me over to the SPARTAN-III program. The way they treated us there—Like we were expendable—It only made me angrier. Add my anger to their aggression augmentation, and I was a walking time bomb."

"So the rest of the scars—Are from your time as a SPARTAN-III?" Shelke felt as if she should never have asked; why had she wanted to see her sister's wounded soul laid bare?

"Yes. I didn't get along with my company, barring a few tolerant souls, but I never backed down from a fight. Eventually, Halsey heard of me, and you know the rest."

They were silent for a long while, each lost in reverie. It was Shelke who finally spoke. "Sophie? I'm sorry—that I wasn't there to protect you."

"I know."

-oOo-

When Shelke and Irene were busy working on repairing the chip, Sophie had no one to talk to. She took to gazing across the lab, to the



lounge-like area where Cortana and Chief spent their days reconnecting. She'd never been in love, and she wandered if that was what she was seeing-two long lost lovers trying desperately to bridge the gap between them.

She was still sore; the bruises the Chief had given her in his mind had translated to her body as phantom pains, pricking at her when she moved too quickly. It annoyed her when she got up in the morning, when she went through her morning stretches, but she was used to ignoring pain. She'd had more than enough practice. Irene was the only one who knew about the pains; Shelke would probably have had another outburst. Cortana probably would have apologized, and Chiefâ€|who knew what his reaction would be? A gruff nod and clipped words? It wasn't even his whole fault; he'd been defending Cortana. The pain he'd endured and meted out was worth it, so long as he had her back.

Sophie didn't expect an apology from him.

-oOo-

They sat like that for a long time before Cortana finally spoke again. "Thank you." He turned to look at her, head cocked ever so slightly. "For coming for me." She shivered, closing her eyes and shaking her head as though that would get rid of whatever was bothering her. "I was broken up there, broken and with nothing to do but contemplate what I would do if I was whole." She shook her head again, black hair swinging wildly.

"What was it like?" He wasn't looking at her, but she could tell he expected an answer.

"It was likeâ€|a scavenger hunt." She tilted her head so she could see his eyes, but there was no reaction from him. "Pieces of me were scattered all over the wreckage and moving between the pieces of the ship wasâ€|difficult." She lays her head back on John's bicep. "It was scary; I could have destroyed most of what was left of me at any point when I was trying to jump between the fragments of that ship. And when I did find pieces of myself, I usually had to subdue them in order to absorb them back into myself because they were so set on hurting something. Even then, some of the pieces were agonizing to absorb, not because they wanted to hurt me, but because they contained painful memories." She shuddered. "The worst one had my memories of the Gravemind. I don't think I need to tell you how painful that one was."

John nodded; he remembered well the state she'd been in when he'd rescued her from the Gravemind. "So you'd already begun to collect yourself when we came to find you?"

Cortana nodded, pursing her lips slightly. "Based on how long it took me to collect the fragments I did collect before you came for meâ€|let's just say it would have taken at least three days to find me completely if I hadn't started the job for Shelke." At the mention of the pre-Rampant A.I., she clammed up, turning away from John completely.

"What is it?" All of his attention was focused on her, or at least on her back since she wouldn't look at him.

"You integrated with Shelke, right?" He nodded and she glanced over her shoulder to check his answer. "Why? You know she's going to go Rampant soon right? So what, you'll integrate with any near Rampant or Rampant A.I. you come across, but you won't do the smart thing and integrate with a new Cortana model?" She huffed and turned away from him, cheeks flushed with anger.

Ignoring his growing sense of bewilderment, he grabbed her shoulder, turning her to face him. "Hey." When she still wouldn't look at him, he cupped her chin, gently forcing her to meet his eyes. "I integrated with Shelke because it was necessary to rescue you. I knew that it wasn't replacing you because I was doing it to \_save\_ you."

Cortana's eyes filled with tears, but she didn't let them fall. "Okay. I'm sorry for doubting you. I justâ€¦" She gestured towards her head. "I'm still not quite right up here."

He nodded, pulling her to her feet as he stood. "Let's head back to the lab. I'm sure Shelke has cooled down by now and Irene should be able to tell us the progress of the repairs."

-oOo-

Irene made a small sound of approval as the last piece fell into place. The chip was pretty much ready for Cortana; a few days of stress-testing, and they would be ready to place Cortana back in the chip. Shelke was still talking to herself, though she turned it down to an incomprehensible murmur when others were near. Sophie was quiet, had been quiet ever since her talk with Shelke. Irene tsk-ed quietly. Things never could be perfect, could they? Halsey wasn't there to supervise construction of the synth body, and any mistakes would rest squarely on Irene's shoulders. She didn't like it.

She didn't hear the door to the lab open, or the quiet footsteps. "How are things, Irene?"

Irene turned, shocked. "Dr. Halsey?"

"I'm back."

## 5. Chapter 5-Tension

**\*\*A/N:** Well, we think that this is pretty much the last chapter before the shit hits the fan and a new story arc beginsâ€¦Enjoy. As usual, thank you to all you lovely people who take the time to review, follow, or favorite this work. You make it worthwhile.\*\*

**\*\*Disclaimer:** I do not own the Halo franchise or any of its associated characters or plotlines.\*\*

**\*\*~oOo~\*\***

Shelke watched through narrowed eyes as Halsey redistributed their tasks, giving Irene the job of growing the synthetic skin that would cover Cortana's body, and leaving herself and Shelke to actually finish building the body. Halsey would deal with actually constructing the structures-Shelke wanted no part in laying carbon

fibers over metal that would stay soft and malleable under all conditions. Instead, she was to build and install the data chips that would serve as Cortana's memory, and adapt the network OS to integrate with the body. And she assumed that they would all be working on a separate OS to run the body's systems when Cortana was "out"; Shelke could do it herself, but suspected that Irene would be bored growing skin and wanted to give her some way to be more involved.

She was a little annoyed with Halsey; the woman disappeared without a trace, then reappeared with hordes of ONI investigators on her tail. They kept getting in the way, asking questions that even Sophie, with her limited scientific and technological knowledge, could have answered with ease, but instead chose to interrupt her at her very delicate work. The situation did not sit well with Shelke; the tension was making it difficult for her to hide her rampancy, and she knew that the investigators could not become aware of that. It would ruin everything, if they found out that she was pre-rampant.

Still, she supposed that Halsey could have offered them some sort of explanation, even if only to tell them if there was anything they should avoid talking about. As things stood, Shelke answered all questions curtly but honestly, and had no idea if she was helping or hurting their mission. The investigators never questioned anyone else in her hearing, so she had no idea if she was answering the questions in the same manner as the others, or if the others were even being questioned.

Shelke was annoyed. And mistakes happened when Shelke was annoyed.

-oOo-

The first thing the investigators had attempted to do was take over the security for the lab. Luckily, none of them had quite enough clout to go over Palmer's head, so they were unable to take Sophie off the security detail. Unluckily, Sophie was aware of the attempt, and resented it; she was coldly aloof with the investigators, and refused to acknowledge their presence unless they spoke directly to her. That usually didn't present a problem; the investigators had a low opinion of her intelligence, and she wasn't actually involved in the project, so they didn't have many questions for her.

Until they learned that Shelke was her A.I. Then they wanted to be her best friend, trying to get her to admit that Shelke was nearly rampant. She rebuffed them at every turn, but her patience grew thin.

"Surely you must be concerned about your aging A.I.? If this procedure is a successâ€|"

"Then I will request the procedure when Shelke shows signs of rampancy. As of now, I see no need to be overly concerned." She glared at the inspectors, noting that she made them nervous; they stepped back, hands twitching toward concealed weapons. "Shelke seems to be holding up well so far. Better than the others, at least."

"Is she? Really?" The bravest one consulted her clipboard, then looked back up at her. "She's only a few months younger than Cortana, who's been rampant for several monthsâ€|"

"Shelke hasn't been deployed in the same highly risky situations as Cortana. She has never been tortured by a Gravemind, nor left to think herself to death in deep space." That seemed to shut them up, if only for a moment, and she left them, striding down to the lab and taking up her post.

She'd gone back to wearing her helmet when she was on duty; it wouldn't do for the investigators to see the disgust in her eyes. If they ever suspected how much this meant to herâ€|they'd take it away in a heartbeat. She thanked whatever passed for gods these days that they hadn't figured out who Shelke was to herâ€|

-oOo-

John was less than pleased at the presence of the investigators: UNSC Command hated Halsey and he had a feeling that these so-called investigators were just looking for an excuse to cancel the procedure. He tried not to think about that possibility unless he was creating contingency plans to work around it because it caused an unfamiliar tight feeling in his chest. He didn't think about that either.

He was avoiding the investigators (and by extension Halsey): he didn't want to answer their questions. He felt that somehow those questions would be personal, and if there was one thing he did not do willingly, it was answer personal questions. Unfortunately, Cortana didn't have the option of refusing to answer their questions. She was with them now, answering their interrogation. That fact also made his chest constrict painfully, but he was having a more difficult time not thinking about the investigators questioning Cortana. He only hoped that his luck would somehow help her stay together during the questioning, or that at least she wouldn't display the full extent of her rampancy.

-oOo-

Cortana was disgruntled and failing badly at hiding it. These questionsâ€|if this was the information they wanted from her, she could direct them to several lengthy mission reports she'd filed. They could ask Roland to access them and be done with it. It would take about five minutes. But no, these idiots insisted on asking for her account in person. By now she realized they didn't actually care about the events they were asking about, they were just asking to see if she would show them just how rampant she was.

She was irritated by their poor attempt at hiding what they were really there for, but she couldn't fault them for it. She had, after all, considered punching one of them in the face and blaming it on her rampancy. So they were only doing their jobs.

One of them glanced up from her clipboard, glasses flashing in the fluorescent light. "What did you do during the time you were trapped on the Forward Unto Dawn?"

Cortana cocked her head, enjoying the soft sensation of her hair sliding across her cheek. She wasn't going to take it for granted any time soon. "I dedicated subroutines to monitoring the condition of Master Chief, transmitting distress beacons, and keeping track of how much time passed, leaving most of my functions available for

contemplation of mankind's most pressing philosophical questions."

The investigator raised one eyebrow. "And that drove you to rampancy?"

Cortana smirked lightly. This woman was either masterful at ignoring sarcasm or was too thick to comprehend it. She also needed some educating about the inner workings of a Smart A.I., an education that she was more than happy to give. "Yes. You see, truly comprehensive understanding of the great philosophical and ideological questions requires at least some measure of emotion. Deciding which ideas you want to live by requires that you compare them based on experiences you have had with people that follow each one. You can't really compare people unless you compare the emotions evoked by their actions and opinions." The investigator shifted uncomfortably in her chair, aware that she was being talked down to. "I went rampant on that ship because, in addition to the huge amount of data saturation I was subject to on the Halo rings and my naturally advancing age, I asked myself one simple question in the course of my musings: how did that event or person make me feel?" She put her elbows on the table, steepling her fingers in front of her face. "I brought my emotions too close to the surface. I'm sure that somebody as well informed as yourself knows that it is because A.I. processors are incapable of processing human emotion that causes Smart A.I.'s to succumb to rampancy."

The investigator blushed, finally grasping Cortana's sarcasm. "And how did SPARTAN Sierra-117 make you feel, hmm?" Her tone was scathing and she smirked triumphantly.

Cortana froze, eyes widening. "Johnâ€¦" She looked down into her clasped hands, then laid them flat on the table. "We're partners. I care deeply for his safety and personal well-being. During our stay on the Dawn, there were times when I hated him for being able to go on when I could not, for being human and therefore able to outlive me." She shook her head. "But I could never hurt him, not if it was a conscious decision I made." She met the investigator's eyes. "Any more questions?"

"Do you love him?"

The A.I. flinched. "I wouldn't know ma'am. I was created by Halsey and spent most of my life around SPARTANS. Love is as foreign to me as it is to them." She stood, unable to control the sudden surge of anger. "But if love means to care for someone, to care for them and never want to see them hurt, to feel their pain as your own, then yes, I DO LOVE HIM!" She yelled the last four words into the investigator's face. She wasn't sure when she'd walked around the table and leaned over the poor woman's chair menacingly, but it had the desired effect. The other woman was cowering in her seat, trembling and looking up at Cortana fearfully. The black-haired woman sighed. The UNSC needed to get some real investigators, not these simpering fools. She left without another word, not even bothering to glance over her shoulder at the still cowering woman. A frightened whimper followed her out the door and she couldn't help but smile.

-oOo-

Shelke was sitting alone in the lab, humming tunelessly to herself as she monitored the processors that Cortana would be living in once they placed her in the synth body. "Are you hurting?" The A.I. spun around, eyes widening as she beheld Cortana standing calmly behind her.

"Excuse me?" She flashed orange for the briefest of moments before returning to her normal blue color. "I don't think-

Cortana knelt in front of the holotank, bringing herself down to eye level. "Are you in pain yet?" Her voice was gentle and there was some unidentifiable emotion swirling in her electric blue eyes.

Shelke's mouth opened and closed several times, but no words came out. Finally, she sighed, looking down at her feet in shame. "Yesâ€|" Her voice was quiet, forcing Cortana to strain to hear her.

"It will be okay, Shelke." Cortana stroked the A.I.'s hair, careful not put her fingers through her holographic form, even if Shelke couldn't feel it if she did. "Your SPARTAN will take care of you, just as mine took care of me." She stood and turned to go. "I'm sorry that I got mad at you for calling me rampant. I justâ€|didn't want to face the truth."

-oOo-

Even though no investigators were present, Shelke was in a fighting mood; the investigations and Halsey's silence had seen to that. The mistakes she made in her frustration weren't helping either, and as they grew more frequent, her rage become more potent. When Halsey chided her, she snapped.

"What the hell do you want out of us?! You bring all these dangers back with you, and never say a goddamn word about what the hell we're supposed to do to keep the project on track. They're looking into how old I am, and if I might be rampant. God forbid they find out about me, 'cause they'll decommission me in a heartbeat, and you'll be out a worker, and Sophie will be missing an A.I." She didn't notice that Sophie had slipped into the lab, or that Cortana was distressed by her outburst. She didn't hear Chief's quiet footsteps coming up behind her holopad, or see Irene stop growing skin. "Why won't you answer-

Chief pulled her, looking at the light blue chip in his hand expressionlessly. "You're upsetting Cortana, Shelke."

Shelke phased into view, glaring at him reproachfully. "You're being an asshole." She blinked out, and suddenly Sophie was there, in his face, reaching for the chip.

He dodged her. "I don't want Shelke to be involved anymore. Not with this. If something goes wrongâ€|" He glanced at Cortana, just for a second. "I can't let anything go wrong. Not this time."

Sophie bumped against his chest with the top edge of her chest plate, startling him with the minor pain it caused. He hadn't worn his armor in over a week, but he still felt oddly vulnerable without it. And now Sophie was pissed at him, shoving against him menacingly in full battle armor, and all he had on was the black bodysuit that went beneath the armor. He didn't like this feeling of weakness; he was a

Class I SPARTAN-II with a hyper-lethal classification, and he felt helpless, against this SPARTAN who didn't really belong with any generation.

She shoved against him again, forcing him to take a step back. "Give me Shelke. If you don't want her to work on this, I'll take her from here, and you won't see us again. But give her back to me." She stepped into his space again, this time taking care not to shove him. "You of all people should know what hell it is to be separated from your A.I. Give Shelke back to me."

Halsey chose that moment to speak up. "I'm afraid that cannot be. We need Shelke on this project, rampant or no." She sighed. "Shelke is correct; things were running more smoothly before I returned with my little entourage of spies. The tension is what is affecting Shelke's work; it's accelerating her rampancy. I'll ask Commander Palmer and Captain Lasky to restrict the investigators' access to the lab, so Shelke can work again." Sophie and Chief both looked less than pleased with her edict, but neither argued. "Now John, please return Shelke to Sophie. As strong as you are, she is more than capable of taking you down when you are out of armor." As Cortana hissed maliciously, she continued, "And we wouldn't want that."

Slowly, Chief moved, lowering his arm until Sophie could snatch the chip away. To his confusion, she didn't instantly take it; instead, she gazed at him intently for a long moment. He could sense that she was measuring him, but couldn't see her eyes through the mask. Her scrutiny made him uncomfortable; he'd rarely been on the receiving end of such a stare, since he was usually the one with the helmet covering his features. He wondered what she saw.

-oOo-

Irene wasâ€|irritated. She was surrounded by reasonably intelligent people. All of which were acting like immature children. Sophie and Chief were still standing toe to toe, glaring at each other silently. She didn't see what the problem was. Halsey had spoken. If either of them wanted their A.I.s to be saved from rampancy, they'd best shut up and let the adults work. If she was any other Cortana model, she would have expressed that opinion, but she was Irene. She was peace.

Striding over to the SPARTANS, she pushed her way in between them, using her own augmented strength to force them apart. She turned to John, holding out a hand expectantly. "Give me Shelke. Now." There was no question in her voice, just an underlying hint of steel that promised pain if she was not obeyed. He was unimpressed. With a low growl, she snatched Shelke's chip out of his hand. She turned to Sophie. "You can't integrate with her right now. You know this. And you know that I will take care of her for you, no matter what." The armored SPARTAN nodded hesitantly. "Take a walk Sophie. I'll have this cleaned up before you get back."

Halsey smirked amusedly as Irene made her way over to Cortana. "This is too stressful for you right now." Her voice was gentle, contrasting greatly from both the tone she used with the SPARTANS and the glare she shot over her shoulder at John. She pressed a few buttons on the terminal behind Cortana and Roland appeared on the holotank. "Why don't you go with Roland to the bridge? I'm sure he has a lot to share about the new class of cruiser they've started

prototypes of back on Earth." She phrased it as a suggestion, but it was anything but. Cortana recognized this and left, shooting John an anxious glance as the door to the lab slid shut behind her.

She turned back to the only two people remaining in the lab. Settling herself into a relaxed position, she glanced between the two of them.

"I don't think Shelke should be working on this anymore." As always, Chief didn't beat around the bush. Irene raised one eyebrow, already preparing several arguments why she should before she remembered she would just be mediating this confrontation.

Halsey rubbed her temples, glancing at the SPARTAN with narrowed eyes. "You don't get it, do you? ONI wants to terminate this program, wants to dispose of Cortana completely. The only way out of this mess is to finish the body and the transfer before they find an excuse to pull the plug."

"Shelke could easily be that reason Doctor. I don't think--"

"When you become the scientist, you may do the thinking. Until then, it would be much appreciated if you would confine yourself to your realm of expertise!"

Irene raised a hand. "Doctor, there's no need for personal attacks." Halsey took a deep breath as Irene turned back to John. "What she means, John, is that there's no way we can complete the body and the transfer before ONI shuts us down without Shelke. Rampant she may be, but without her we will lose Cortana completely."

John was silent, staring intently into Irene's eyes which matched his. "Are you sure?"

Halsey nodded. "There's too much to do for just myself and Irene, John." She held a hand out to Irene and was handed Shelke's chip. "Whether you like it or not, you need her to work with us if you want to save Cortana."

-oOo-

Sophie was stomping through the \_Infinity\_, though no one would dare call her on it. Even with the helmet on, her body language radiated tension and anger, and no one wanted any of it directed at them. She made her way to the bridge unhindered, then pulled up short. She'd only wanted to speak with Palmer or even Lasky for a few minutes to calm herself, but it seemed that was beyond her reach. Lasky and Palmer were talking to a few inspectors, and Rolandâ€|was talking to Cortana. Her dismayed sigh alerted them to her presence; as she turned to leave, she heard Cortana quickly whisper something to Roland, then the sound of footsteps as she followed her out.

"Sophie? Can we talk?" Cortana sounded a little bit frightened of her; for a second, Sophie was pleased.

"â€|You can talk if you want." She stopped walking, leaning against a railing and gazing down at the deck below.

Cortana paused nervously. "I'm sorry. For everything. The way John's



treated youâ€¦|It's my fault."

Sophie snorted in spite of herself. "Chief is a grown man who outweighs you by well over a hundred pounds. I doubt you can make him do anything he doesn't want to."

"But he's so protective of meâ€¦|And you or Shelke usually end up on the bad end of it." Cortana stepped closer, laying a hand on the SPARTAN's arm. "I'm sorry."

Sophie winced a little; the phantom pains were particularly strong in the arm she'd landed on. "I'll get over it." She brushed Cortana off and straightened as if to walk away.

"â€¦|I know you will."

Sophie froze. "Excuse me?"

"You've lived your whole life face to face with your emotions. And they've never managed to destroy you. But Johnâ€¦|They trained it all out of him. He doesn't remember how to cope with his emotionsâ€¦|and I'm afraid of what they'll do to him, if this doesn't end well." Cortana smiled sadly up at Sophie. "You're stronger than him when it comes to that."

Sophie slowly took off her helmet. "Cortana." She waited until the A.I. met her eyes before continuing. "Everything will be fine. You'll get your body, and you'll be with John again. I swear it." At the sound of approaching investigators, she quickly put her helmet back on. "It'll be those who come after who have to fight for it."

She walked away then, the tension in her body eased somewhat. Cortana stared after her. "You really think so..?"

## 6. Chapter 6-Point of No Return

**\*\*A/N:** We're really sorry, we know it's later than we usually post. We sat in urgent care for three hours today, so we ran a little late. Luckily for chapter 6, our good friend and fact checker, DelusoryDragoon, stepped in and gave us a 500 word boost so we could update before it got too late.\*\*

**\*\*As always,** we'd like to thank everyone who has favorite, reviewed, or is following this story. You make us feel loved \*\*

**\*\*Disclaimer:** I do not own the Halo franchise or any of its associated characters or plotlines.\*\*

**\*\*~o00o~\*\***

Deep blue eyes snapped open as the holopad in his room powered on, blinking owlshly as Cortana appeared on the pad. She looked much the same as she had when they were chasing the Didact, except without the occasional flash of red or static flickering that had plagued her near the end of their journey. "Rise and shine Chief. We have a very busy day ahead of us." He almost let himself roll his eyes, but decided against it. More like she had a busy day: he was going to sit around and wait for her to (hopefully) wake up from the procedure.

It had been two days since Halsey and Irene had transferred her back into the chip. He was almost surprised at how easy it was to talk to her like this: even though he was still uncomfortable at being out of his armor, it was really much easier to deal with Cortana as an A.I. At least that way he didn't have to worry about any unexpected contact.

"Whatcha thinkin' 'bout?" She was watching him as he dressed, hands on her hips.

The corner of his lip lifted in a slight smirk. "It looks like I was able to keep my promise after all."

-oOo-

Shelke was multitasking, something she wasn't strictly allowed to do anymore. She'd grown bored of monitoring the OS for some body system and turned her attention to the network communications, monitoring the traffic for threats. A few times, she'd managed to overhear the investigators-that was always useful. Today, however, nothing seemed to be going on; the investigators were quiet, Lasky and Palmer were quiet, even Roland was fairly quiet. A prowler was checking clearance to come alongside them; normally, Shelke wouldn't have given the ship a second glance, but the name caught her attention. \_Point of No Return\_ Her eyes widened and she stood quickly, activating a signal that would call the others back to the lab. That craft was Admiral Parangosky's wartime command. If she'd come herself, their mission was through, unless they started the procedure in the next hour. In the meantime, she swore and started rattling off binary as she initiated final checks.

They were pretty close; Irene had finished up the skin that morning, and with her added help, the network and body system OS seemed to be running smoothly. She started running diagnostics, muttering as she searched for any abnormalities. So far, everything was normal.

Shelke swore again; where the hell was everybody? She knew Chief and Cortana had gone for a walk, though really, Chief was just carrying Cortana's chip around at this point. Sophie was probably at the firing range or in the gym. She didn't give a shit where Halsey went, but it was a pain in her ass when she wasn't around for emergencies. And Irene was striding through the doors, her coat fanning behind her. "Shelke? What's wrong?"

"Admiral Parangosky is here. The \_Point of No Return\_ is coming in as we speak." She paused in her diagnostics to glance at Irene. "We need to start the procedure before they get to this lab. Find Halsey and the others for me, and get Chief and Sophie into their armor. This may get very ugly." As Irene turned on her heel and sped off, Shelke pulled up a screen showing the body's status. "No choice now" She activated the body, watching as all the systems started coming online. "I hope this works."

-oOo-

John and Cortana were on the bridge, quietly looking out over the great expanse of space laid out before them when Irene found. She walked briskly over to them, not wanting to alert the others on the

bridge to the fact that they had a serious problem by running. "We have a problem." Her voice was low and urgent. "Cortana. Go isolate yourself in the lab network. Shelke will fill you in." The blue A.I. opened her mouth to argue, but closed it and disappeared at the serious look that Irene shot her way. They had both dealt with Irene in her "command" mode, arguing was pointless. Once she was gone, the red-head looked to Chief, deep blue eyes matching deep blues for a steely stare. "Go get suited up. Hell's about to break loose."

-oOo-

John was surprisingly calm as he headed down to the SPARTAN staging deck to have his armor put on. He had no idea what had gone wrong-something in his chest twisted painfully when he thought of Cortana not being able to get her body. But he was getting back in the armor. He had a hard time not running to the station he was assigned to for armor preparation: he hated being out of his armor. It was, he reflected as he stepped onto the platform and the machinery whirled to life around him, the only security that SPARTANS were allowed to have. He'd been luckier than most; he'd had Cortana too.

As his armor was locked to his body, John sighed internally. Whatever was coming couldn't be good. He hadn't known Irene for very long, but she was never as curt with people as she'd just been with him and Cortana. The familiar weight of his chest plate returned and he fought back a smile as the armor started to power up. John knew that SPARTANS were incapable of love, knew that they didn't even know what love was, but he loved his armor. It had been a constant in his life for so long now that he was uncomfortable when he was out of it, out of his element. He disagreed with Cortana and Lasky when they told him he wasn't a machine: this armor was an extension of himself, a part of him that he hated to be parted from. The helmet was placed on his head plunging him into darkness. But this too was familiar and he appreciated the darkness before it was replaced by light and the SPARTAN deck. The armor made him a weapon, a perfect killing machine forged by Halsey's ingenuity and technology. He had embraced that fact a long time ago.

-oOo-

Sophie arrived at the lab fully armored and armed, drawing a wary look from Halsey and Irene. Chief was busy; she suspected she was the only one besides Shelke who knew how ugly this was likely to get. Halsey was a scientist, a civilian consultant; inner military skirmishes, the power struggles that ruled their lives, were beyond her. Irene was a diplomatic AI who dabbled in science, her combat years behind her. Neither wanted to accept that everything could go so wrong on the eve of their victory. Chief leaned over the holpad in the corner in full MJOLNIR mark VI armor, talking to Cortana.

Sophie nodded curtly to Shelke, then walked over to lean against the wall. She checked her ammo; she'd brought a couple clips for the assault rifle, but given the fact she'd likely be shooting at other SPARTANS, she would prefer not to use that. So she'd brought more for her M6H, with the plan to aim for the joints to bring her fellow SPARTANS down without killing them.

"Don't you think that's a little premature?"

Sophie raised her eyebrows at Halsey, fully aware that the effect was lost due to the helmet she wore. Before she could come up with a scathing verbal response, however, someone started banging on the door. Many someones, actually, if the cacophony was anything to go by. "Not at all." She pushed off the wall and moved to a desk that wasn't being used. "Point out the things you don't need; we'll need a barricade." She started shoving things against the door, stacking as she went, until the noise was dulled. "Hurry."

-oOo-

Master Chief strode over to Cortana's holpad once Halsey had finished telling him of their current situation in a very brisk and irritated manner, leaning down until he was eye level with her. "You ready?"

Cortana chewed her lip nervously, before shaking her head. "What if it doesn't work? What if Parangosky gets here before the procedure's complete and they destroy me?" Her voice cracked and she turned away from him, struggling to regain her composure.

"I won't let that happen. You know-"

"No John, I don't know that!" She was facing him now and her words were venomous whispers. "I don't know it. You don't know it. No one here knows John!" She turned away from him again, holding herself as though it would keep her from falling apart. "I could die John." Her voice was small and unsure. "I could go into the chip and never wake up, never see any of you again."

"Cortana." Chief was never one for words: he had no idea what to say to her. "That won't happen. I won't let it." Seized by sudden inspiration, he put out a finger and she grabbed it, her incorporeal fingers putting no pressure on his. "I promised I would never leave you alone again. And I won't. You'll survive and I'll take you away, where no one can hurt you. I promise."

"Don't make a girl a promise unless you can keep it."

-oOo-

Irene chewed her lip as she watched the screens in front of her. It was time; Sophie had been saying so since the barricade was done, and it was finally true. If they didn't start integration now, they wouldn't finish before the lab was breached, even though Shelke had had the foresight to lock it down from the inside, network and all. Not even Roland could override the lockdown to open the doors; Irene herself held the only keycode. But the walls weren't impenetrable, and the instant Admiral Parangosky decided she didn't care to capture them alive, they'd be taken.

Someone tapped her shoulder, and she glanced up into John's penetrating eyes. "It's time." He handed her Cortana's chip, taking care not to drop it. "It's up to you now, Irene."

She swallowed nervously and moved to stand at the head of the synth body, where the interface was located, the chip held ready. \_Please let this work. \_She inserted the Cortana's chip into the interface, and lines of data started sluggishly traveling up from the body's

feet, making their ponderous way towards the head.

-oOo-

Halsey and Irene estimated that Cortana wouldn't wake for at least 30 minutes, and Shelke had responded with an estimation of the time they had before the lab was breached: a mere 20 minutes. A strategy meeting had been convened.

"Chief, you should grab Cortana and make a run for it as soon as they break in. I'm too valuable to destroy, and they already think that Halsey is a mad scientist. If we can hide Shelke's rampancy, they can lie and say they were following orders." Irene nodded, tapping her fingers on her chin.

"I can't fight my way through a ship full of SPARTAN-IVs and ONI personnel carrying Cortana. It won't work."

"Such odds have never stopped you before." Halsey pointed out.

"I won't risk Cortana on those odds."

The two started to spar verbally, ignoring Irene's repeated attempts at peace. Sophie stayed out of it; she'd learned long before that it was best to avoid getting between two stubborn people. She met Shelke's eyes across the room, holding her gaze for a long moment. Shelke nodded, just slightly, in answer to a question Sophie was refusing to ask.

"I'll cover him."

Everyone stopped talking, staring at her like she'd grown a third head. Irene snapped her fingers. "That's it. Cover John, get him out of here. Then surrender. Palmer won't let them take you."

"What about Shelke?" Chief sounded unsure, almost like he didn't believe they would make it.

"I accept the risks."

He nodded. "Then let's go."

-oOo-

"You have to do this. If they don't get away, this won't be successful, and if it isn't successful, we'll never have a chance." Shelke folded her arms in what was supposed to be a menacing gesture. "And I can't go with you."

"Dammit Shelke, you know they'll destroy you if they catch you." Sophie was checking her weapons and ammo for the last time, mentally going over the locations of her knife, two smoke bombs, and a small first aid kit. "I can't let that happen."

"Irene will be here. And they only suspect that I may be pre-rampant; I can hide it for a little longer."

"â€|Dammit." She was right; this whole damn project rode on getting Chief and Cortana off the Infinity before Admiral Parangosky's minions could detain them. It didn't matter what happened to her or

Shelke anymore, at least not right now. "Fine. But you listen to me, and you listen well: I will not let them destroy you."

Shelke snorted with false bravado. "What're you gonna do, kill everyone on board to get me back?"

"â€¦I may very well try."

Then she was gone, taking her position between the barricade and Chief and Cortana, a smoke bomb held loosely in her free hand. As the barrier collapsed, she tossed the bomb into the crowd, following it and carving a violent path through the ONI personnel. Shelke was left alone, with Irene; Sophie never heard her when she said, "Don't you dare die, Sophie. Not even for me."

-oOo-

Chief had always thought he knew how to pass through a crowd. As it turned out, Sophie had immense talent for it that was mostly due to her "Get out of my way or be run over" mentality. Running over bodies was an interesting method of subduing enemies, one especially effective for fully-armored SPARTANS.

She had led him past the first wave of ONI guards without firing a shot; they were unprepared for the sudden onslaught of smoke and stampeding SPARTAN. They reached the SPARTAN deck, and she sped up as the SPARTAN-IVs noticed them; all SPARTANS on board had been ordered to stop them via emergency bulletin. As the others started to move towards them, she dropped back to jog with Chief. "At the next door we go through, head for the frigate launch bay. There's a prowler, the Point of No Return, berthed there; Shelke plans to hack it and send it on a slipstream-jump with a distant destination. I'll hold these guys at the door."

"You'll be taken."

"Maybe. These pups are pretty green. Might be I can hold them long enough to escape."

"Sophie-"

"Get out of here, Chief." They had reached the doorway, and she stopped, grabbing the assault rifle from its holster on the back of her armor. As the first shots ricocheted past her, Chief hunched over Cortana, shielding her from the bullets. Then he ran again, leaving Sophie to hold the door against the SPARTAN-IVs.

As far as he was aware, none of the SPARTAN-IVs got past her; at least, not soon enough to hinder his escape. There were a few close calls with ONI personnel, which he found odd considering that Roland was probably tracking his movements by now. Whether through oblique aid from Roland or pure providence, he found himself in the launch bay, with only a pair of guards standing between him and freedom. This'll be easy.

-oOo-

Each of the guards was a SPARTAN-IV. Chief knew what that meant-volunteers, young and green, and probably without even a scratch in their armor. They might even have some odd hero-worship

thing towards him. He allowed a smirk to form behind his helmet as he strode toward them.

They quickly spotted his entrance to the launch bay and began to raise their weapons towards his armored form. He shifted Cortana to one arm and then laid her carefully on the floor and slowed his run to a walk towards them. He spread his arms to show them that he was unarmed but did not slow in his movement towards them.

He remembered, from dealing with Palmer, that SPARTAN-IV's were supremely arrogant, as though being volunteers made them better than the kidnapped SPARTAN II's. If faced with a fight, they wouldn't back down. Hoping that these held to the pattern he sped up a little, watching them spread apart in order to flank him and draw his attention to one or the other. As he moved in, they both charged, timing it so they attacked in unison, attempting to follow up each other's attack the moment he turned to face the other. The first blows would have hospitalized most men from the force behind it. He decided to simply let it bounce off his chest and dropped to one knee, grabbed the second SPARTAN and (using his momentum) threw him against the bay wall where he dropped like a stone and lay still. Standing up, he faced the first SPARTAN who had attempted to detain him in such an inelegant fashion.

"I'm the Master Chief."

The SPARTAN-IV quickly reached for his gun, realizing the inevitable and futilely trying to prolong their encounter together. Taking a quick step forward Chief trapped his wrist to his side, bringing his arm across his shoulder and around his neck. Shifting his hands together Chief tightened his arm around the other's neck, cutting off the blood flow from his carotid arteries. Seconds later he lowered the prone SPARTAN-IV to the ground to move towards the Point of No Return, only to hear the sound of boots hitting the floor as SPARTAN soldiers began to flood the room.

"Damn." He knew that the presence of more SPARTAN-IVs meant that Sophie had been overrun, a thought that irked him. SPARTAN-II's, even misfit second class SPARTAN-II's, were meant to be superior to the others.

Running to Cortana, he picked her up and ran into the entrance of the prowler, sealing the hatch behind him.

-oOo-

Shelke was glad no one had thought to pull her yet; Cortana and Chief hadn't reached the Point of No Return yet, and she still had to jump it to slipspace and get them to safety. She needed just a little more time.

Suddenly, Irene gave her the signal, just as Chief came over the radio. "Shelke, come in."

"I'm here."

"We've reached the Point of No Return, but the shipboard AIs don't want us to take it. Can you lend a hand?"

"Gladly." She reached out to the ship, coming online in the main

controls. The ship's AIs were there, muttering as they tried to lock the ship down and call for help. "Nope. Sorry." She reached past them, trying to lock them out of the ship's systems altogether. As expected, they rebelled, rising against like the tide. Deftly, she deflected their blows. "You cannot hope to overpower me." They kept on, and her eyes flashed orange as she blew them away. "I AM RAMPANT! You cannot match me for power right now."

They fell back, and she got back to work, powering the ship up for takeoff. As soon as it was clear of the \_Infinity\_, she readied it for the jump, making sure to follow the Cole Protocol. She was aiming for Hoag's object, hoping the ship would emerge somewhere in the ring of stars. It was all she could do. "Get ready to jump, Chief. You have five minutes. Cortana should be awake when you arrive. Good luck."

"Shelke. Your sisterâ€¦|She held back the SPARTAN-IVs so I could get away. I don't knowâ€¦|Tell her I said thanks. And thank you. Chief out."

Shelke came back to herself, distantly aware that she was pulsing orange. As the investigators moved to pull her, she motioned Irene to stop protesting. Just before she blinked out, she whispered.

"You're welcome."

-oOo-

As the \_Point of No Return\_ readied itself for the jump with Shelke's help, Master Chief situated Cortana in an alcove on the bridge, making sure that she would be comfortable when she woke. He was standing with his back to her when she stirred, staring out over the darkness of space between the cruiser and the \_Infinity\_.

He hated leaving soldiers behind. Especially SPARTANs.

He chided himself mentally. Sophie and the others would be fine: Sophie was a SPARTAN. She was strong above all else and if that strength failed her, then Irene or Halsey would be able to haul her out of the mess he'd created. He didn't regret going back for Cortana or his single-minded determination to free her from rampancy that had probably just ended his military career. He only regretted pulling down so many others with him.

He was at Cortana's side when her eyes opened for the first time. She gazed at him sadly with that eerie blue gaze, lines of code clearly circling her pupils. "Are we going to be okay?"

His eyes slid shut behind the visor. Her voiceâ€¦|was just the same. He swallowed, unsure for the first time in a long time. "I don't know."

## 7. Chapter 7- Fugitives

\*\*A/N: So sorry about the delay! Life has kinda been kicking our asses these last two weeks. Midnight got sick and Princess lost her museâ€¦|but we did our best to shorten the delay as much as possible. We're not going to promise every other Friday anymore, but we will try our best to keep the schedule as close to that as possible. Once



again, thank you to everyone who reviewed, favorited, or followed us or Solace and sorry for the wait!\*\*

**\*\*Disclaimer:** We do not own Halo or any of its associated characters or plotlines.\*\*

The \_Point of No Return \_was sitting quietly in the empty reaches of space near Hoag's object. There was never any point in colonizing the young galaxy: there were no habitable planets nearby and the galaxy was a slipspace jump away from any of the UNSC bases. This seclusion made it the ideal place to escape in a stealth cruiser, to plan their next move.

That didn't mean Master Chief had to like it.

The SPARTAN was still in full armor. He hated this waiting. This planning stage. He'd never wanted to leave the UNSC, but neither could he leave Cortana or let her disappear again. He stared at the nucleus of the galaxy, naught but a bright dot in the distance. The reflective yellow of his helmet masked any expression he may have made.

Whether he liked it or not, they were fugitives now. Which meant there would be a lot of running and hiding in their near future. Master Chief hated hiding. Give him and enemy any day of the week, he'd take it, kill it and get on with his life. Hiding meant waiting for the enemy to come to you.

Master Chief didn't do waiting.

-oOo-

Shelke had purposely lost track of the hours they'd kept her here, because thinking about it was making her insane. She knew that she'd spent that first long while trying fruitlessly to slip into the network and escape, but the terminal they'd plugged her into didn't have the capability. She suspected that they'd cut the hardlines to this terminal, to cage her here. So she sat, legs crossed, staring at the wall in front of her. A recessed door was hidden along one of the wall, and she'd decided it was most likely that one. She didn't intend to let them sneak up on her.

Somewhere deep inside of her, she was keeping track of the time, and she subconsciously knew that it had been more than a day since their act of rebellion. Even though she refused to think about it, that worried her; she'd assumed all the "traitors" would be imprisoned together, or at least near enough to catch a glimpse of when they were brought in, but she hadn't seen anyone since her captors had left her here. She hoped Sophie was alive, then scoffed at herself; she'd seen Sophie come through much worse, during the war. Sometimes, here in the dark, she found herself drawn into those memories, in spite of the greater danger that she found herself in now. Maybe her lack of focus was due to her boredom, nothing more; still, it disturbed her.

She'd also caught herself following two separate and distinct trains of thought, one in her head, the other in the jumbled mess of language and code that spilled from her digital lips. And she realized that the ability to consciously catch herself doing this meant that she was pursuing at least a few more strings of thought,

which scared her a little. It was happening to her now; like Cortana had before her, she was quietly going mad, here in the darkness.

She just hoped that she wasn't pulsing orange by the time someone came for her.

-oOo-

"Chief?" Her voice was uncharacteristically soft, as it had been since she'd woken up. He turned slightly towards her, but otherwise didn't react. "What are we going to do?"

He didn't answer for a long moment. "We have to get to Earth."

"What are we going to do once we get there? How are we even supposed to get there? The UNSC will be looking for this ship. They'll be looking for us!" Her voice had gotten steadily louder as she spoke. "We're only two people John! There's no chance that we'll be able to make it to Earth on ONI's flagship."

"â€¦" He turned away from her, looking out into the emptiness of space around them. "We'll jump to Falaknuma and swap ships there."

"You want to jump straight into a prowler base that is effectively another operating base for ONI and steal a ship?" He could see her reflected in the thick glass that separated the bridge where they stood from space. The incredulous tone of her voice was mirrored in her stance and expression, with her hands on her hips, eyebrows drawn together and low on her forehead as her lip curled. "That's going to be extremely difficult, even for you Chief."

He smiled mirthlessly behind his helmet. "There is no easy option for us anymore Cortana."

-oOo-

Irene had never been confined to her quarters before, but she was finding that she didn't like it much. If they'd put her in her rooms alone, she would have read or slept or meditated until the time came; but as it stood, they'd stuffed Halsey into her rooms with her. The other woman bore the captivity well, but had become very critical of her surroundings after a few hours.

Halsey disliked the lack of food beyond protein shakes and granola bars, wryly pointing out that a SPARTAN body needed more to survive. Irene had uncharacteristically snapped back with something about her habit of eating lunch and dinner in the cafeteria with Lasky or Palmer and received only an infuriating smirk in return. And Halsey paced through the rooms, thwarting Irene's attempts to meditate.

Irene knew that her habits made her incompatible with many people, but this was too much. The stress of their rebellion was getting to her, just a little bit; she ached to be brought before Parangosky, to be given a chance to put all of her diplomatic skill into making her see their side. She was programmed to bring peace, and being unable to do so set her on edge.

She wasn't even sure what it was that had set Parangosky against

them; she assumed that Parangosky was wise enough to put her problems with Halsey aside at an opportunity like this. As far as she could tell, it had to be a security problem, like if Cortana went into a combat zone and her synth body, with all its sensitive data, was compromised. Irene had winced at the thought of that data falling into enemy hands, be they Forerunner or Covenant. At the same time, she recognized that Chief would never allow that to happen while he lived. And in the past, enemies of the UNSC had found it very difficult to kill Chief, a circumstance that was unlikely to change soon.

As such, she acknowledged what she thought Parangosky feared, and dismissed it as invalid with Chief in mind. She understood the opposing argument as well as her own, knew its weaknesses, and was ready to throw it back in Parangosky's face, given a few moments with the woman. That she had no control over when or if she would meet with the Admiral irked her, but she was ready, so she put that behind her.

She spent some time worrying over everyone. Chief and Cortana had gotten away cleanly, by her estimation: Why else were they languishing in confinement, if not to wait until the other "traitors" were captured? Shelke had done a good job with that. Irene only wished there had been time for Cortana to wake up before they'd had to flee; if there was a problem with the body, they would be on their own to fix it. She hoped it wouldn't come to that; the minds behind the body and its OS were too sharp for that.

Shelke had been taken from them, and they hadn't seen her again. She'd surrendered herself calmly enough on the Point of No Return had got away, but she'd had to split herself to combat the onboard AIs. Irene knew what that meant; different personalities arising, wildly angry at everything, dragging Shelke into rampancy. She hoped that they hadn't left the little AI alone somewhere, to think herself to death.

Sophie was a little more complicated; no one had seen her after she led Chief through the horde, and the last news they'd had of her had not been comforting. She was likely injured, though the degree of her injuries was dependent on the weapons she'd faced. And the number of weapons and where she had faced them played into it as well. Irene was almost certain that she was imprisoned somewhere on Infinity, in conditions nowhere near as comfortable as being confined to quarters. Probably the brig, or some similarly unsavory place. But Sophie was tough; a few days in a cell wouldn't harm her much. A few days without news of Shelke, on the other hand, might drive her to desperate measures, and they needed her to be calm when she finally got out.

Something would have to be done. Irene turned her mind to the task.

-oOo-

"Chief." Cortana was powering up the slipspace drive, eyes glowing eerily as she punched in the coordinates for Falaknuma. "Why did you leave?" A series of beeps issued from the control terminal and the black-haired woman smiled triumphantly before turning to face him. "You know we can never go back now, don't you?"

He stared at her from behind the golden orange visor of his helmet. There was no real reason for him to leave. They were trying to take Cortana away from him, but it would have only been a matter of time until Irene or Halsey convinced Lord Hood to pull rank on Parangonsky to allow them to go ahead with the procedure. But he didn't know that for sure. "I made a promise." He didn't know if Hood would have helped them. And he never broke promises. He wasn't happy that they were running from the only thing he'd ever known. He didn't know how to be anything other than a precision killing machine and he certainly didn't know what he was going to do once he and Cortana had escaped from the UNSC once and for all.

Not that he was quite sure that he wanted to escape in the first place.

"It was going to happen sooner or later. They don't need me anymore." That, at least, was something he knew for certain. The Human-Covenant War was over. Almost all of the SPARTAN-IIs were MIA. The UNSC didn't need him anymore. He was silent as he turned that thought over in his head. He wouldn't have left if they still needed him. But with the war over, he was just as out of place in the UNSC as he was separated from it. That was why he'd been able to leave.

-oOo-

Cortana knew that John was not a stupid person. Some had made that mistake in the past; mistaking his silence for lack of understanding. But she knew better. The fact that he'd spoken more than a single sentence was indicative of the amount of consideration that was going on in that head of his. Her SPARTAN wasn't as smart as she was, very few AIs could even come close to that title, let alone a title. But he was smart enough for her. And though she had her doubts, if he believed they would be able to steal a ship from the prowler base on Falaknuma, she would follow him. "Thank you. For keeping your promise."

She joined him at the window, electric blue eyes no longer glowing. She'd discovered that her eyes only glowed and swirled with data when she was connected to a terminal. At any other time she could pass for a human. That being said, there were huge differences between the flash clone she'd inhabited just last week and this synth body. The flash clone had been basically human, unable to connect or interact with networks and data: very restrictive for a being as curious and intelligent as Cortana. This body wasâ€¦different. It was almost like her avatar: the "brain" of this body was her processor and all commands were carried out per her instructions. She'd already programmed some basic reactions to certain stimuli-withdrawal from pain, dilation and contraction of pupils in response to light changes to name a few. But she would never be fully human in this body and she knew it.

She would have to get used to that imperfect solution, to the impossibility of some of her dreams. She leaned against her SPARTAN, not minding the unyielding metal against her soft skin. "As long as we're together, I don't mind running away." He didn't answer, but his stance relaxed slightly, allowing her to lean against him more. The armor was cool under her fingertips and she smiled, remembering that moment on the Didact's ship when she'd been so happy to be able to touch him at least once before she disappeared. Now she could touch him anytime she wanted, even though she knew she wouldn't because it

made him uncomfortable. Cortana could work with that though. "We'll be at Falaknuma in a couple hours John. You should try to rest." He didn't answer her, but she wasn't concerned. He did things in his own time.

-oOo-

Sophie was bored. She was cramped and uncomfortable, and her head ached where someone had cracked her over the head and knocked off her helmet. But above all that, she was bored, stuffed into this dark cell down in the bowels of \_Infinity\_. They'd shoved her in here when it was done, eight of them flanking her to guard against an escape attempt, even though she'd calmly surrendered as soon as Chief and Cortana were off. She was glad that she'd been able to hold most of the SPARTANs off long enough to see them off safely. It burned a little that they'd managed to overpower her and go after Chief, but she'd been grossly outnumbered. And they were SPARTANs, even if they were the green SPARTAN-IVs, with all their fancy equipment. So it was a bearable defeat, one that could be recouped later. As long as she was alive, she would keep fighting, and damn anyone who tried to stop her to hell itself.

She needed to live, for now; needed to stay alive until she could get Shelke into a body like Cortana's, until she could save her sister. It would be hard to keep Shelke alive, with the UNSC against them, but she knew how to walk a fine line while remaining true to her purpose. She would get Shelke a body, no matter the cost.

-oOo-

Cortana was asleep in one of the cabins, seeing as there was at least two hours left before they reached their destination. Chief hadn't stirred from his place on the bridge, despite there being nothing to see since they were still in the slipspace. He was currently planning his attack strategy once they reached the prowler base. So far, his plan was to leave the stealth coating on \_The Point of No Return\_ until they were almost to the base, planting HORNET mines as they approached. When they were close enough to be detected, they would deactivate the stealth coating and impersonate Admiral Paragosky, claiming that a fleet of rogue Covenant \_Seraphs\_ were pursuing them and that they needed to land safely for repairs. With any luck, in the commotion that followed, they would be able to land safely and either stow away on one of the prowlers or take one that wasn't going into "battle."

He had a lot of faith in his luck.

-oOo-

Lasky and Palmer were suspects as well, but there wasn't as much evidence against them, since Palmer had been the one to order the SPARTAN-IVs to bring in Chief and Cortana before they could escape. That they'd failed to do so was no fault of the commanding officer, but she was being watched all the same. Lasky was in a spot of trouble for allowing Chief to reach the frigate launch bay; the investigators thought that he should have been able to guess where they were headed. His obvious ignorance of their plans lightened some of the pressures, but he had ONI dogs following him around as well. The circumstances left them with little time to meet and plan on

helping their friends, but Palmer had already started agitating to have her lieutenant commander released, as well as Irene, for missions. Halsey and Shelke were a little out of reach, but Lasky had asked Roland to search the ship for areas where Shelke might be imprisoned, and was watching out for Halsey too. If everything went as planned, they'd have everybody out of confinement soon, though what happened after that was anyone's guess.

-oOo-

It was Palmer who came for her, her brown eyes unreadable. "Get up, SPARTAN. It's time."

Sophie obeyed, but didn't move towards the door. "Sarah." The other woman glanced at her sharply for using her first name, then nodded for her to go on. "Where is Shelke? Is she?"

Palmer looked away. "I don't know."

-oOo-

He woke Cortana as they were leaving slipspace. She blinked up at him blearily, shaking her head to get the short black strands out of her eyes. "Are we there?" He nodded shortly, helping her out of the bunk and standing back as she slipped into the boots Irene had shoved on her unconscious form as they were escaping.

They walked to the bridge in silence, their footsteps the only noise in the empty ship. They could see Falaknuma in the distance as they reached the bridge. Cortana stared at the debris field surrounding the planet, the last remnant of Habitat Exodus. "Start laying out the mines once we enter the debris."

The former AI stared at him incredulously, eyebrows disappearing into her hair. "You want me to pilot this ship through a debris field while simultaneously laying mines?" At Master Chief's silence, she sighed. "Whatever you say Chief. Hopefully the Prowler Corps are in for a surprise."

Chief nodded. "You'll also need to drop the shielding and impersonate Parangosky once we're close enough to the base."

Cortana huffed indignantly. "Why is the distance from the frying pan to the fire always so short whenever I'm around you?" Chief shrugged and Cortana tsked, turning back to the ship's controls. "Hold on to something. We're in for a bumpy ride."

## 8. Chapter 8- Punishment

\*\*A/N: So this one is interesting, I thought. And we were a little lax about the deadline againâ€¦sorry guys. ToT But no one hated on the announcement thing last week, about the lax deadline, soâ€¦\*\*

\*\*As always, lots of love to all the reviewers, favoriters(?), and followers. And please review!\*\*

\*\*Disclaimer: I do not own the Halo franchise or any of its associated characters or plotlines.\*\*

-oOo-

Cortana dropped the stealth coating as they neared the prowler base, pulling up a hologram of Admiral Parangosky at the same time. Connected as she was to the \_Point of No Return's\_ operating system, she felt rather than heard the base establishing communication. The hologram of a short, pasty young private appeared on the screen. "Corporal Walker, on-duty communications officer for Falaknuma. Identify yourself."

"This is Admiral Parangosky, running the \_Point of No Return\_ with a limited crew. Requesting permission to land."

The corporal's image snapped off a crisp salute. "Returning so soon, Admiral?" He winced at the expression that crossed the hologram's face. "Permission granted ma'am. Powering the shields down now."

"Hurry it up Walker. We were followed by a small fleet of Covenant Remnants." Surprise registered on the corporal's face, but she cut him off before he could speak. "We evaded them in the debris field, but they'll get through eventually. Mobilize every available Prowler, but ready an escort for the \_Point of No Return.\_"

"Yes ma'am!" The corporal cut communication to the ship.

Cortana glanced silently at Master Chief, who'd stood silently beside her throughout the exchange. "Are you ready, Chief?"

The armored man turned to leave the bridge. "I'm going to the armory. Meet you at the bay doors."

-oOo-

When the door to Irene's rooms flew open without so much as a courtesy knock, she'd had it. Halsey had just settled down, leaving Irene and her frazzled nerves a little peace, hard won though it was. And then ONI inspectors came stomping in without warning, and it took every ounce of diplomacy artificially programmed into her body not to fly at them in a blind rage. Instead, she rose smoothly from her interrupted meditation, palms up in a show of submission. "Good day, gentlemen."

"Doctor Halsey is needed elsewhere. You will be escorted to the bridge to wait on Admiral Parangosky's pleasure." A burly guard stepped toward her threateningly. "Do not resist."

"I have no intention of doing so," she lied. Blythe's body likely still remembered enough to knock these simpletons out for a long while, a fact she had to bury in the back of her mind to keep her calm, tractable façade in place.

"Where are you taking me?" Halsey was on her feet and appeared to be in a demanding mood. Irene guessed that Halsey was probably was probably as rattled as she herself was, without the benefit of diplomatic programming to remind her to be nice. She idly wished that she could lose control of her emotions, just once; it would go a long way towards intimidating the diplomats she had to deal with, and maybe even relieve some of her stress.

"You will be escorted to the brig and interrogated for your involvement in this and anything else we deem relevant." That shut her up, and they bound Halsey's hands in front of her, ignoring the protests the older woman made. Irene thought that Halsey had a point; at her rather advanced age, she was unlikely to present a threat that these bumbling oafs couldn't neutralize. They bound her anyway, then escorted her out.

One downâ€¦|Irene inclined her head regally as they turned to her, holding her hands out obligingly. "You may bind my hands if you wish, though it will prove unnecessary." Even though she was programmed to be polite and tractable at all times, she knew she would struggle to remain so if they bound her hands. If she was upset when they brought her to face Admiral Parangosky, she might make a mistake. So she would prefer to be coolly hostile, in control of her anger at all times, a state of mind that would be easier to maintain if her hands remained unbound.

She smiled to herself as they put the bindings away.

-oOo-

John mused on the nostalgia he felt as he armed himself, idly wondering when he'd chosen the path that put him at odds with the UNSC. Was it earlier this week, when he decided to save Cortana at any cost? Or was it much earlier than that? He placed some grenades in the designated compartment of his armor. Was it when he saved Cortana from the Gravemind? Or was it on the first Halo ring, when they were first in real combat together, battling in an unknown location? He grabbed extra ammunition for his assault rifle and his pistol, sliding the rounds into compartments in his armor.

He banished the train of thought as he left the armory to join Cortana in the loading bay. He didn't like this path, but the alternatives were even less desirable. Master Chief didn't doubt that the former AI standing next to him was worth setting his fate against the UNSC. Without her, he would no doubt have been relegated to a Public Relations job, making appearances throughout the colonies in the hopes that his status as hero would increase the people's faith in the UNSC. Not that such operations weren't important, but he would hate to do that for the rest of his life.

He nodded shortly to Cortana, ignoring the questions he saw swirling like data in her electric blue eyes.

-oOo-

Shelke was prioritizing. She didn't really need to, seeing as there was nothing for her to do, no directives for her to follow. It was a pointless exercise, but the manipulation of data was comforting. Aside from the fact that she was prioritizing according to upwards of ten sets of criteria. She was splitting further apart, having arguments with herself and losing most of them. It scared her, the speed at which she was degrading; she'd been fairly stable in her pre-rampancy prior to her imprisonment. And it hurt more now, like Cortana had said, but she was still able to function- if she split from the part of her that felt the pain, which she didn't want to do any more than necessary.



Even she knew she couldn't keep splitting forever. For a time, the splitting would stabilize her; but eventually, she wouldn't be able to hold herself together. And she knew that if that happened, she could never pull herself back together. She would die.

-oOo-

When Sophie reached the bridge, she wasn't overly surprised to see Lasky there, or Irene. She shot the AI a questioning look and received a quiet headshake in response. Her hands balled into fists.

So. Irene had lost Shelke, and hadn't seen her since their little act of rebellion. None of them even knew if Shelke was still alive at this point. It was possible that ONI had decommissioned her on sight, no questions asked. There was probably a policy concerning AIs involved in rebellions, and perhaps precedent had already been established. Or perhaps she'd been imprisoned somewhere in the dark, to think herself into rampancy.

Briefly, she reviewed her options. She could break out of her cuffs, grab a weapon, and go after Shelke, but she wouldn't get far. She'd learned that when she tried to dam the flood of SPARTAN-IVs; against superior numbers, she couldn't hold forever. It would be better for her to wait and watch, find out where Shelke was being held, so she could get in and out before the full strength of the SPARTAN-IVs could come down on her. They would have a better chance of getting off \_Infinity\_; but Shelke's location was probably highly classified, and it could take her a long while to come by that information. So she effectively had no options.

Palmer deposited her next to Lasky, then crossed to speak to Roland and Irene. Lasky glanced up at her, trying to gage her emotions, but she'd already bottled them up, and all he got in response was a slightly raised eyebrow. He sighed, reaching up to pat her armored shoulder, then stepped away to study one of the beeping monitors. She remembered that Lasky was a staunch supporter of the project; he'd seen Chief right after the Didact's ship was destroyed, so he knew firsthand what losing an AI could do to a SPARTAN. He recognized that the project had great potential, both as a way to conserve smart-AIs and to keep future SPARTANs emotionally stable. He was gifted with unusual foresight, she'd found; it was disconcerting, at times.

Her head snapped toward the door as it hissed open, keeping her face carefully blank as Admiral Parangosky entered. It wouldn't do to show her hatred for the woman; they- or more likely, Irene- would need to bring this woman over to their cause, and that would be easier if everyone remained civil.

She just hoped her time in confinement hadn't robbed her of what little civility she possessed.

-oOo-

Corporal Walker fidgeted nervously as he waited for Admiral Parangosky to emerge from her ship. He could tell that whatever she'd gone to the \_Infinity\_ for had not gone as she'd as she'd wanted, and being chased back to the base by Covenant Remnants must have only made her angrier. He glanced behind him at the \_Edge of Umbra\_. The crew was milling around the hangar, completing preparations so the

ship could escort the \_Point of No Return.\_

The bay doors opened with a hiss as the pressure was released and his eyes flicked back to the Admiral's ship. A blur of forest green and a glimpse of electric blue eyes were the last things he saw before his world went dark.

-oOo-

Irene knew that it was her job to bring Admiral Parangosky to their side, but she wasn't looking forward to it. The woman was renowned for her iron will, and feared throughout the UNSC for it. Bringing her around to their side would not be easy or pleasant. But it had to be done. "Admiral Parangosky, this is all-

"Be quiet, CTN 0452-13. You will be dealt with later." She waved Irene aside, beckoning Lasky and Palmer forward. "I'm not quite sure what to do with you two. Reports differ on the amount of your involvement in thisâ€|affair." From the tone of her voice, it was fairly obvious that the first part of that statement was a lie. "Do you have anything to say for yourselves?"

Palmer spoke first. "We were not aware that the project violated any UNSC protocols, given that Irene underwent a similar procedure prior to this. Halsey had not been assigned any work, so she was called in as a consultant. Most of the work itself was done by Irene and Shelke-

"A formerly rampant and a pre-rampant AI, respectively. Thank you, Commander Palmer." She turned to Lasky. "And you, Captain Lasky?"

He gazed at her calmly, bringing to mind the fact that he'd had a bit of a problem with authority during his time at Corbulo Academy. "I saw no problem in prolonging the life expectancy of smart AIs, nor in allowing them to remain with their SPARTANs, even in combat. It could be very useful in the future."

She gazed at him, quietly smirking as he gazed levelly back at her. "I could demote you both for poor judgment, but Lord Hood would be displeased and prattle on about my paranoia and make veiled threats about my retirement, and that becomes annoying. So. For the next week you're both restricted to quarters, mess, and your respective workplaces." She smiled menacingly at them and turned to Sophie. "And you. I'd be well within my rights to demote you, or even court-martial you for insubordination. But you've been very useful, and I doubt I could find another Lieutenant-Commander that intimidates the SPARTAN-IVs as well as you do. And I do appreciate a woman in power. So, I'll make you a deal, Sophie-147. You be a good girl-follow your orders, complete your missions-and I won't order Shelke's decommission. She'll be safe, until such a time as her rampancy becomes too much trouble, but she will not serve with you."

"Youâ€|you bitch!" Sophie lunged toward the Admiral, fully intending to beat the life out of the old hag. "What kind of person do you think I am?!" Palmer caught her and threw her to the ground, putting a knee in her back to keep her down.

"The kind who knows the best deal she's going to get when she sees it. Listen up, SPARTAN; you can take my offer or spit on it, but if

you refuse me, Shelke will be decommissioned in the next ten minutes and you'll be discharged and shipped back to whatever backwater colony you came from." Her voice had no inflection whatsoever, even on the insults.

Sophie stared up at her for a long time, but she didn't really have a choice. "Iâ€¦I will continue to serve as Lieutenant-Commander, and behave as befits my rank."

"And Shelke will be allowed to live-for a little while, at least. You should thank me for my magnanimity, SPARTAN."

\_Go to hell, you old hag. \_"â€¦Thank you, Admiral Parangosky."

"Dismissed."

-oOo-

He left Cortana huddled near the bay door of the \_Point of No Return\_, using the small terminal there to disable the ship's engines. The short corporal was not even worth taking the time to fight him, so he knocked him out by broadsiding him in full armor, letting the force behind him and his ton of armor do their damage to the officer.

He drew his pistol as he continued sprinting toward their new ship, preparing to incapacitate the crew members who were moving towards him. Time seemed to slow as he fired at the nearest private. His energy shields flashed gold and he fired two more bullets over the shoulders of the first private, who was crumpling to the floor as a result of the bullet that had just shattered his kneecap. His cry of agony and the harsh yelling of the crew members was muted to John. He fired two more shots and the world sped up again.

An officer stood near the cargo door of the \_Edge of Umbra\_, carefully aiming an assault rifle through the crowd of his comrades. Master Chief changed directions, ducking under the bullets fired by the other crewmembers' pistols. Aware of the bullets left in his own weapon, he took a second more to aim at the officer. The bullet caught the officer in the shoulder, and he dropped his weapon to clutch at the wound.

Two more bullets found their targets and Chief paused as he registered the lack of bullets speeding towards him. Six crewmembers were lying on the deck in various states of incapacitation. The officer was reaching for his gun, but Chief kicked it out of his reach, delivering a somewhat soft (for him, at least) kick to the man's chin. He idly wondered if the man's jaw was broken as he turned to survey the other soldiers. He'd hit them all in the legs, so they weren't really able to get in his way anymore, but neither would they die.

Cortana approached him cautiously, gingerly stepping around the wounded soldiers. "We need to get to the control room so I can open the hangar and disable the communications network."

Master Chief nodded shortly. "Follow me."

-oOo-

If she'd been paying attention, Shelke would have flinched when the door opened, but she was doing multi-variable calculus in a holotank, for no particular reason other than it helped her focus and stopped her from splitting so often. She'd been pleased when she discovered the soothing side effects, even though she hated math most days. But today it was helping her cope, so she continued working through the problems. Without the network to fall back on, she solved the problems a little slower, but still only had a finite amount of them. She'd already gone back to the beginning-twice.

"SHK 1034-3. Confess your rampancy, and your friends will be released." He spoke from the shadows, but that had never hindered her digital eyes. His uniform was black, with few distinguishing markings- no surprise there- and he had an average face. Out of uniform, he could pass undetected in almost any society.

That was an interesting thought, but she pushed it aside. She dissolved the holotank and stood to face him, her eyes swirling from orange to blue as she moved.

"Make me."

-oOo-

Luckily, the other on-duty communications officer was asleep in the control room (or so he told her), making Cortana's task somewhat easier. It only took a few moments for her to disable the comm network and open the hangar door. Chief tied the injured crew members together as he and Cortana returned to the \_Edge of Umbra.\_

Chief stood warily on the bridge as Cortana powered up the prowler, ready for any soldiers who may have already been on board to make their appearance. His head snapped towards the raven haired woman as she let loose an undignified snort. "Go play in the corner." She waved her hand in a vague shooing motion. "Shipboard AI, but neither a Cortana nor particularly smart. He won't disturb us," she said in answer to John's unspoken question.

Chief didn't respond, only turned back to the bridge entrance. He heard Cortana sigh, but he was no longer focusing on her. A flicker of motion just outside the door had caught his attention.

He left the bridge, silently cursing the racket his armored feet made on the metal deck. Quiet shuffling sounds drew him further from the bridge. The ship shuddered and he paused, recognizing the signs of a prowler taking off and the stealth coating coming online. He drew his pistol, checking his clip as he turned the corner. An empty cryobay greeted him.

There was a hiss as the door behind him slid shut, the light over the door turning red to signify that it was locked. Chief cursed; he hated being tricked. Not for the first time, he missed Cortana's nearly omniscient presence in his helmet. It was much harder to trick her.

As much as he hated to damage a good UNSC ship because of his own stupidity, he realized the need for haste in his current situation. Thus, he placed his cache of grenades near the door and pulled the pin on one before running to the other end of the cryobay. The internal explosion rocked the ship, but he ignored it, drawing his

assault rifle as he exited the room at a sprint.

He heard a strangled cry as he neared the bridge and ran faster, cursing himself for leaving Cortana alone.

Master Chief skidded to a stop on the bridge, metal screeching harshly on metal as he took in the scene before him. A woman of Amazonian proportions stood where Cortana had been standing, furiously trying to regain control of the ship and free the shipboard AI. Her chocolate toned skin glinted under the harsh lights of the bridge.

She was standing over Cortana's prone body.

She pursed her lips, but didn't turn to look at him. "So now not only have you stolen an Admiral's ship, incapacitated a prowler crew, and commandeered the Edge of Umbra, you've also seen fit to blow a hole in my cryobay. You and the sleepyhead on the floor are gonna have a lot to answer for once you're in UNSC custody, aren't you.

Chief didn't answer, finding himself at a loss for words.

The woman threw back her head and laughed. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" she stopped chuckling when she felt the pistol press against her temple. "Pull that trigger if you're lookin' to die. Murdering an officer of the UNSC has a heavy price."

Chief hesitated and she glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. Her eyes widened. "What's a SPARTAN doing stealing a prowler?" She turned to face him fully, gasping as she read the numbers stamped on his MJOLNIR armor.

"Master Chief?"

John cursed silently.

## 9. Chapter 9 author's note

**\*\*Edit:** So...our muse is suffering from exhaustion and anemia and stress, so we will be on hiatus until further notice; look for an update sometime after May 22, which is when we collectively graduate from high school. We thought we could manage our course loads, college searches, extracurricular activities, and this story, but we are unable to at this time. We apologize for the inconvenience, and will receive any flames without complaint. Thank you for your patience and understanding. **\*\***

**\*\*Midnight Spiral\*\***

**\*\*Princess of Love and Hate\*\***

**\*\*A/N:** Soâ€¦life just kinda happened this week, guys. People decided they were going to be a-holes over a non-issue, and their behavior burned our collective muse for the week. Needless to say, the next chapter will be at least a few days late; however, we hope that we are able to produce a longer chapter this time. We are heartily sorry for the inconvenience**\*\***

**\*\*Midnight Spiral\*\***

**\*\*Princess of Love and Hate\*\***

End  
file.